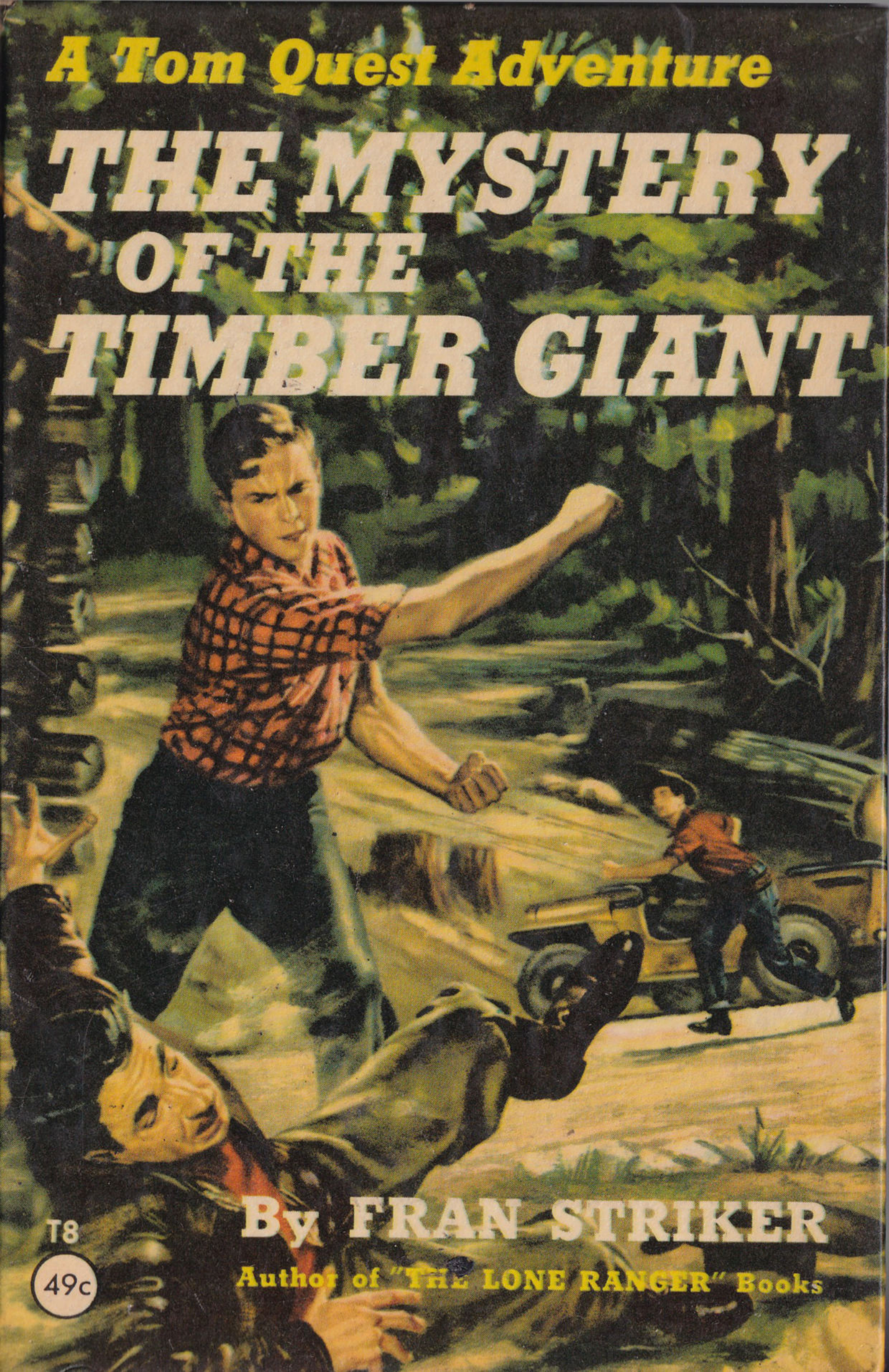
A Tom Quest Adventure

THE MYSTERY OF THE TIMBER GIANT



By FRAN STRIKER

Author of "THE LONE RANGER" Books

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MYSTERY OF THE TIMBER GIANT

Tom wondered if his strength would hold out

A Tom Quest Adventure

MYSTERY OF THE TIMBER GIANT

By
FRAN STRIKER

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Mystery of the Timber Giant

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CHAPTER 1

The Hoolihan's Letter

WITH UNMUFFLED ENGINE roaring, the jeep raced at top speed along the highway. The steering wheel looked like a toy in the huge hands of the man whose bulk seemed to be wedged into the seat. The jeep had no windshield. Rushing air flattened the wide brim of the driver's battered cowboy hat back against the crown, and beat against his face.

The driver's name was Gulliver.

Squinting against the wind and sun, he saw the entrance to the San Francisco airport that marked the end of a jeep trip that had begun at his ranch in Texas.

"'Bout time I got here," he muttered. He turned sharply into the parking area, cut off the ignition, and

stepped hard on the brake pedal. The small car skidded several yards, then stopped less than three feet from a startled attendant.

"Yo', there!" bellowed Gulliver in a voice that had the spine-rattling quality of a buzz saw operating on a sheet of rusty tin and the volume of a foghorn. "Am I in time for the three o'clock plane for Hawaii?"

The attendant stared wide-eyed and slack-jawed at the owner of the voice. He seemed to be in a state of shock. He moved his lips, but no sound came forth. He pointed overhead.

Gulliver looked up and saw a Super-Constellation heading west.

"Is that it?"

The attendant nodded. He regained his poise during the time it took Gulliver to squirm out of the cramped driver's seat. The color returned to the man's face and he found his voice. "You crazy fool!" he began. "What's the idea of driving in here like a wild steer on a rampage?"

"I got no time to answer questions," Gulliver replied. "I got to find a couple o' friends." He started toward the big building.

"Hold on!" the attendant shouted. "You can't leave that thing standing in the middle of the parking area!"

"Park it where yo' want to," the big man called over his shoulder. "But see that yo' handle it gentle."

"Gentle!" repeated the attendant. He stared at the broad back of the incredibly big man walking away. He

was not the first to have been somewhat awed by Gulliver.

Gulliver was an awe-inspiring individual. Even without his high-heeled boots he stood well over six and a half feet and weighed close to three hundred pounds—none of it fat. His head seemed to rise from his massive shoulders with no neck in between, and his chest had the proportions of a barrel. His eyes were deep-set beneath thick eyebrows that met above his broken nose to form a solid hedge of bristling black at the base of a sloping forehead.

In Texas, where he had been born and brought up, Gulliver had often wrestled with angry steers and wild horses. His face bore scars from these engagements and from rodeo contests. And there were scars from later battles against wild beasts and jungle savages in remote parts of the world. These were mementos of scientific expeditions on which Gulliver had accompanied the noted archeologist and mathematician, Hamilton Quest.

At the door of the airlines building Gulliver paused and glanced at the plane, now only a distant speck in the sky, that carried Hamilton Quest to a well-deserved vacation. Then he went inside and strode across the vast room to one of the many counters. He addressed a nattily uniformed young lady who was writing something on a pad.

"Pardon me, miss."

The girl looked up at the face that seemed to have

been hacked out of a block of solid granite. She blinked and tried to speak in a level voice. "Y-yes, sir?"

"I'm lookin' for a couple o' gents named Tom Quest an' Whiz Walton."

"Are—are they scheduled for one of our flights?"

"No, ma'am. But Tom's father was supposed to be on the plane that just left for Hawaii. Tom an' Whiz were to see him off."

"I—I'm sorry," the girl began.

Gulliver brushed aside the rest of her remark. "I figured yo' might've noticed 'em around here. Tom's pushin' eighteen, but he's big for his age, an' he's a r-ighty good-lookin' young feller. Whiz Walton's a newspaper writer. Yo've maybe heard o' him. He writes a column for a couple o' hundred newspapers."

"I've read his column, but I wouldn't know him by sight. I'm sorry, sir, that I—"

"He's about six feet tall, an' kind o' skinny," Gulliver interrupted. "His eyes are kind o' tired lookin' as if he wasn't gittin' the right sleep."

"Gulliver!"

Turning quickly, Gulliver saw Tom Quest and Whiz Walton hurrying toward him.

"Yo', Tom!" he shouted, advancing to meet his friends. "I'm sure glad to see the two of yo'." He gripped Tom's hand. "How yo' been, Tom?"

"Fine!"

Shaking hands, Whiz Walton grinned. "Hello, you unpredictable Troglodyte!"

The big man eyed the columnist appraisingly. "Whiz," he said, "yo're bad in need of outdoor exercise an' solid food. Yo' look more pulin' than usual."

Tom spoke before Whiz could reply. "What are you doing here, Gulliver?"

"I came to meet yo' an' Whiz."

"Hold on," said Whiz. "Tell me if I'm wrong. We planned to see Tom's father off, then take tonight's train for your ranch in Texas where, by your invitation, we were to stay for a few weeks."

"That," nodded Gulliver, "was the original plan."

"It's changed?"

"Yep."

"Why in blazes didn't you let us know?"

"That's what I'm doin'," Gulliver replied. "I knew yo'd both be here to see Tom's dad take off, so I came to tell yo' that the plan to go to the ranch has had to be changed."

"You came all the way from your ranch?"

Gulliver nodded.

"How?"

"I drove my jeep."

Whiz Walton shuddered at the recollection of nerve-shattering, back-breaking rides in the jeep that had been stripped of muffler, windshield, springs, and other refinements Gulliver considered non-essential. "Y-you," he said incredulously, "you drove the jeep?"

"Yep."

"Across two-thirds of Texas, all of New Mexico and

Arizona, across the Mojave Desert and the California mountains?"

"I didn't do it all in one lick," Gulliver explained. "I pulled off the road a couple o' times to snatch a wink o' sleep."

"You knew where we were staying, Gulliver," Tom said. "Why didn't you telephone or send a telegram to the hotel?"

"Maybe he thought he'd save time by driving," Whiz suggested dryly.

"The fact is, I had to go through San Francisco on my way to Pine City, so I figured it'd be better to meet yo' an' explain things than to try to tell yo' the situation over the telephone."

"Where is Pine City?" Tom asked.

"North o' here in the mountains. It's timber country."

"Why are you going there?"

"Halfpint Hoolihan needs me."

"Who is he?"

"Didn't I ever tell yo' about him, Tom?"

Tom shook his head. "I never heard of him."

"The name is new to me," put in the columnist. "But I like it—Halfpint Hoolihan." He chuckled.

"I don't know what his real name is. Everyone used to call him Halfpint on account o' his size. He's a little critter, but he's got more downright spunk than any man I ever knew. If it warn't for him, I wouldn't be here today."

"Where would you be?" asked the irrepressible columnist.

"I'd be dead," Gulliver said flatly. "Halfpint saved my life when we were prospectin' together in Mexico. I stepped into an old mine shaft an' dropped about fifty feet. Busted my leg when I landed. Halfpint tied one end of a rope to a pack mule an' dropped the other end down to me. I hung on while the mule pulled me out. Then the Hoolihan—which is what Halfpint calls himself—used his rifle for a splint an' helped me git astride my horse so's I could ride to the nearest sawbones. Now he's in trouble an' I gotta go to him."

"Of course," Tom Quest agreed. "Is he in Pine City?"

"No, but that's the town nearest to his timberland. Y'see, we struck some gold in Mexico. I bought a ranch with my share, an' Halfpint bought timberland."

"What kind of trouble is he in?"

"He didn't say much in his letter, Tom." Gulliver fished a grubby sheet of ruled notebook paper from his shirt pocket. He unfolded it and handed it to Tom. "Here's the letter. Read it to Whiz."

It was a brief note, written in large, round letters with a soft pencil. Tom covered the errors in spelling and punctuation as he read aloud:

"Dear Pard: The monopoly has got the cards stacked against me. The spalpeens have done me out of my pine, and if they get away with it, I'll have nothing left. It looks like they will get away with it because the law is on their side. But I've still got my six-gun which I aim

to use when they come to start cutting the trees. If you don't hear from me again, you'll know the Hoolihan went down fighting for his rights. From your old pal,
H. P. Hoolihan."

"Gosh," said Tom, when he had finished reading. "It will be a shame if your friend loses all his timber."

Gulliver's reply was a throaty rumble. "He's not goin' to lose it. Not if I can help it."

Whiz Walton broke in suddenly. "Did he say something about a monopoly?"

Tom nodded.

"Let's see that letter."

Tom handed it over.

"As soon as I got it," Gulliver said, "I sent a telegram to Halfpint an' told him to keep his bristles down an' his gun holstered 'til I got there. Then I loaded my chest with the gear I'll need, an' put the chest aboard the jeep an' set out."

"What are you going to do?"

"I dunno, Tom. I can't tell 'til I talk to Halfpint an' learn more about the situation. But I'll tell yo' one thing. I'm goin' to Pine City geared for trouble. Now let's git out o' here an'—"

"Just a minute," Whiz interrupted. "Hoolihan says he's up against a monopoly."

"Yeah."

"There's been a lot of rumbling about a syndicate that's trying to gain control of all the pine on the west coast. I've heard lots of builders mention it—even in

the East. But no one's been able to peg down anything definite or tangible. This friend of yours, the Hoolihan, might have some first-hand information."

"Yo're welcome to come along with me an' talk to him."

"I'd like to go, too," said Tom Quest eagerly.

Gulliver frowned. "I dunno about yo', Tom. There's likely to be a gunsmoke ruckus, an' I wouldn't want anythin' to happen to yo'—"

"But if Whiz goes—"

"I didn't say I'd go, Tom," the columnist said. "But," he added wistfully, "I'd like to break the story of the pine lumber monopoly."

"It'd be better to break the *monopoly*," said Gulliver. "I'm goin' in my jeep. If yo' want to come along, say so."

Whiz snapped his fingers sharply. "I just thought of something. I want to make a phone call." The hint of an exclusive story affected the newshound as the scent of game affects a superb hunting dog. He became tense, alert, and decisive. "Wait for me in the coffee shop," he said. "I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Who yo' goin' to call?"

"A man who may be able to tell me a lot about the lumber situation. His name is Ketterson."

Tom watched the slim, well-dressed columnist head toward the row of public phone booths, then turned to Gulliver. "We might as well go to the coffee shop," he said.

CHAPTER 2

Three to Get Ready

THE GIRL scribbled on her pad. "Pay the cashier on your way out." As she handed the tab to Gulliver she noticed a ring on the big man's finger. Experience had taught her that a friendly word frequently meant a larger tip. "Gosh," she said, "that's a nice ring you're wearing."

Gulliver grinned. "My friend here has got one just like it."

"Guess you must belong to the same club." The waitress flashed a smile and hurried to wait on other customers.

The rings had special significance to Tom and Gulliver. They had been designed by Tom's father and given by the scientist to the two individuals who were closest to him. On each ring a flat spiral of gold was mounted on a heavy base. At the outer edge of the spiral, a re-

verse curve gave the device the appearance of a question mark.

That spiral had brought Tom and Whiz Walton together. Readers of *Sign of the Spiral* will remember how these two friends and Gulliver followed the clue of the ring's pattern to capture an outlaw gang in a ghost town.

The spiral figured importantly in Tom Quest's life a second time during an adventure among the headhunters of Ecuador, as related in *The Telltale Scar*. Here again Whiz Walton shared dangers and thrills with Tom and Gulliver, and his account of the expedition into the jungle established his national reputation as a newspaperman.

Fate seemed to conspire to bring the trio together. Tom, Whiz, and Gulliver waded through the Florida Everglades to locate the strange hideout of a gang of crooks, as reported in *The Clue of the Cypress Stump*.

On an expedition into Mexico, they found a lost city peopled by survivors of a prehistoric race, and on another expedition witnessed strange rites among the Mandan Indians in the Red River country. And there were other adventures during which each member of the triumvirate had used his specialized knowledge and ability to good advantage.

Gulliver was unwaveringly loyal and the possessor of tremendous strength and raw courage. But equally important was the wisdom he had acquired by years of existence close to Nature. His knowledge came from all

things living as distinguished from knowledge acquired from books and colleges. Forests, mountains, and plains had been his classrooms, and all out-of-doors his study, where beneath the stars he meditated on his observations.

Whiz Walton, the sophisticated New York reporter, possessed a keen understanding of people in all walks of life. He knew and recognized all forms of sham and subterfuge and had a cutlass-like ability to slash away these outer shells to expose the true character of an individual. Self-assured and competent, he was at ease in any company. His reputation and connections opened doors to sources of information that were closed to others.

Modesty concealed many of Tom Quest's attributes. His mother's warm, sympathetic nature and handsome features were obviously his by inheritance, but one had to know Tom well to realize that he had also inherited his father's brilliant mind. Hamilton Quest, once a college professor, had written a number of scholarly books on subjects that included applied logic, psychology, and the higher branches of mathematics. Tom, despite his youth, had read and studied these, and had frequently applied this specialized knowledge to solve problems that stumped Gulliver and Whiz Walton. He had excellent health and loved life. Each day was a new adventure with questions to be answered and problems to be squarely faced and honestly solved without compromise of character.

"Here comes Whiz."

Gulliver swallowed the last of his coffee and looked up as the columnist approached. Whiz wore a satisfied grin and his snap-brim hat was at a jaunty angle. "Things," he said as he perched on a stool next to Tom Quest, "are breaking our way."

"Good!" said Tom.

Gulliver said, "Start talkin'."

"First of all, I want to give you a run-down on Ketterson."

The waitress appeared. Whiz ordered coffee.

"Ketterson," he said, "is a multimillionaire. He cleaned up in the lumber business, then retired. He lives in a big house on Telegraph Hill."

"What's that got to do with Halfpint Hoolihan?" Gulliver demanded.

"Let me finish," Whiz said impatiently. "I interviewed Ketterson a couple of years ago at the time he retired. I did a bang-up story and he liked it. I hoped he'd remember me, and he did. When I talked to him on the phone he told me to come out to his house tonight."

"What's he know about the lumber monopoly?" the big man asked.

"I didn't mention that, Gulliver. I told him I was looking for information about the industry. We're to call on him at eight o'clock. Then I called my paper in New York. Got Langdon, the managing editor, on the line and told him I had a lead on an exclusive story

about the lumber monopoly. He gave me the go-ahead."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that, beginning now, I'm working on an expense account." Whiz looked at his watch. "Have to work fast," he said. "Got to buy shoes and clothing for the timberlands."

"Me, too," added Tom. He held his breath during the interval that followed. If he were to be excluded from the trip to Pine City, this was the time for Gulliver to say so. Gulliver's silence was significant. Tom relaxed. He knew that he was going.

Gulliver said, "Whiz, I can't waste time while yo' poke around talkin' to people about the lumber monopoly. I told the Hoolihan to hold off fightin' 'til I got there, but he's short on patience."

"Did you plan to start for Pine City tonight?" the columnist asked.

"No. I been drivin' pretty steady since I left my ranch, an' didn't waste time sleepin'. I figured on stayin' in Frisco overnight an' settin' out for Pine City about the middle o' the mornin'."

"That's fine," said Whiz. "Ketterson's the only man I want to talk to and I'll see him tonight. Then we'll go to the hotel where Tom and I have been staying—get a good night's sleep, and start for Pine City about nine or ten in the morning."

"Nine or ten!" exclaimed Gulliver. "By that time

the mornin's blame near gone. We're startin' out about six o'clock."

"Six!" the columnist groaned. "You said the middle of the morning!"

"That's the middle. It's halfway between midnight an' noon."

"Then we'll have to buy all the clothes we need this afternoon."

"What yo' don't have time to buy," said Gulliver, "yo' can pick up in the lumberin' towns on our way to Pine City."

CHAPTER 3

Appointment at Eight

PROMPTLY at eight o'clock, Gulliver turned his heavily loaded jeep into the driveway of a big stone house in the exclusive residential area on Telegraph Hill. Near the front door he braked to a halt, turned off the ignition, and eyed the mansion.

Tom occupied the other front seat. "Golly!" he exclaimed. "I've never been in a house as big as this."

He turned toward Whiz Walton, who was cramped in the rear quarters with Gulliver's medicine chest. "Are you sure this is where Mr. Ketterson lives?"

"This is the place," grunted the columnist as he tried to extricate his feet from the narrow space between the seat and Gulliver's chest. "I've been here before." His

feet came free. He swung them over the tailgate and stepped to the ground.

"What're we waitin' for?" Gulliver demanded. He led the way up several wide stone steps and stabbed the doorbell button. For a moment nothing happened. Gulliver turned to Whiz. "Yo' sure Ketterson's expectin' yo'?"

"Of course he is."

"Then why don't he answer the doorbell?" Gulliver pushed the button again. "Maybe it's out o' kilter. I'll rap." He balled his huge hand and hammered with his knuckles.

"Take it easy!" cried Whiz. "You'll break the door down!"

"That's one way to git inside," the big man replied blandly.

The door swung open and a voice, shrill and discordant, cried, "Hold yer hosses!" The big, solidly built woman saw Gulliver. Her slate-gray eyes opened wide in dismay. "Who in tarnation are you?"

Before Gulliver could speak, Whiz Walton said, "Hello, Emma."

The woman's rugged face broke into a friendly smile. "Whiz," she said. "Come on in. Ketterson's expectin' you."

"These are my friends," Whiz said. "I told him I'd bring them with me."

Tom and Gulliver were introduced to Emma Brandon, who, as housekeeper, supervised all the details of

running the big home of the wealthy bachelor. She was well past middle age, probably in the middle sixties. She wore a plain dark dress that fitted her ample form loosely. Her gray hair, and there seemed to be a lot of it, was simply done on top of her head, leaving her ears exposed. She was breezy and informal as she escorted the visitors into a small den and invited them to sit down.

"Ketterson's talkin' on the telephone," she said. "He'll come here when he's through. Meanwhile, I'll keep you company. Who did the poundin' on the door?" She looked at Gulliver. "You?"

Gulliver said, "Uh-huh. I tried the bell an' figured it didn't ring, so—"

"It rang. But it's the butler's night off an' I was in the south wing. It took time to get to the door."

"I didn't mean to tap hard," the big man said sheepishly.

"It's all right, Gulliver." Emma smiled at Tom. "Your friend," she said, "is a lot of man."

Tom returned the smile and agreed.

Whiz Walton said, "Emma, you and Gulliver have a lot in common."

"How's that, Whiz?"

"You used to be a cook, didn't you?"

"Yes. What's that got to do with it?"

"Gulliver's one of the best cooks I ever knew."

"You mean to say *he* can cook?" Emma looked at Gulliver with new interest.

The big man answered the question soberly. "Grub I cook has got authority."

"Well, of all—" The housekeeper didn't finish the sentence. Instead, she said, "After my husband died, I sold the ranch in Texas—"

It was Gulliver's turn to be surprised. "Yo' had a ranch in Texas?"

"Yes."

"Thunderation! I got a ranch there right now. My place is near the town o' Bliss."

"I know where that is. But our place was nowhere near there. We were farther west."

"Did yo' ever bust horses?"

"No, but I could bulldog a steer an' throw a diamond hitch as well as any waddie on the spread," the big woman replied. "But to get back to what I started to tell you. After I sold the ranch to pay off debts, I came here to the coast an' got a job as cookie in a lumber camp. That's where Ketterson found me. He owned the outfit an' came to look things over. He liked the way I ran the kitchen, so he hired me to run his home. That's about ten years ago. I've been here ever since."

"Good evening." Ketterson, standing in the doorway, spoke in a soft, well-modulated voice. His conservative gray suit had been expensively tailored to fit smoothly over beefy shoulders and a stomach that betrayed a love of good food and a lack of exercise. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Don't apologize," said Whiz Walton, shaking hands.

"We're grateful to you for giving us a little of your time. This is Tom Quest. I told you about him on the phone."

"How do you do, Mr. Ketterson," Tom said. He found the millionaire's hand soft and flabby, and the handshake somehow lacking in sincerity.

Gulliver, when introduced, said, "Yo've got a lot o' house here, Ketterson."

"Thanks."

"A place like this must have a mighty fancy kitchen."

"It's adequate. Are you hungry?"

"No, no. We et before we came. I wasn't throwin' around a hint for grub."

"Are you particularly interested in kitchens?"

"He's interested in cookin'," put in Emma Brandon. She added, "With authority."

"That's right," Gulliver said.

Tom Quest thought this a strange conversation, considering the purpose of the visit. It was wholly unlike Gulliver. He glanced at Whiz Walton. The expression on the newshound's face indicated that he, too, was somewhat bewildered.

Gulliver was saying, "I'd sure like to see yo' kitchen. Would yo' mind, Ketterson, if Mrs. Brandon showed it to me while yo're talkin' to Tom an' Whiz?"

"Not at all."

"Gulliver," said Whiz, "aren't you interested in what Mr. Ketterson may be able to tell us about the lumber business?"

"Yo' can tell me later what he has to say. Right now I'm interested in the kitchen."

"But—" The columnist broke off abruptly when Gulliver gave him a wink that only he could see. "All right," he finished the suspended sentence. "Go ahead."

"This way," said Emma Brandon.

Gulliver followed her from the den.

"Your big friend is quite a character," Ketterson observed with a smile as he closed the door.

"Yes," Whiz agreed, "he certainly is."

"He really is a fine cook," Tom said.

"No doubt." Ketterson sat down. "Cigar?" he asked, opening a humidor that stood on a small table beside his chair.

"No, thanks." Whiz brought out his pack of cigarettes. "I'll have one of these. Tom doesn't smoke."

Ketterson selected a cigar, lighted it, and blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "When you phoned," he said to Whiz, "you told me you wanted some information about the lumber industry."

"That's right. I know you're no longer active in business, but I thought you'd have a pretty good idea of what's going on."

"I keep informed. I have many friends and acquaintances in the lumber business, and I keep in touch with them."

"Isn't it a fact that most of the pine comes from the west coast?"

"If you refer to the big, straight-grained timber that can be made into Grade A lumber for building purposes, that is a fact," Ketterson agreed. "There used to be forests of fine timber in many parts of the country, but money-mad cutters moved in like swarms of locusts. They recklessly cut all of the fair-sized trees and trampled down the others. They began in Maine and worked westward across New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. Almost all of the country, except for the west coast, had been denuded before the Government became aware of what was happening and stepped in with a few control measures."

The retired magnate puffed his cigar and continued, "Of course, there are many varieties of pine. All parts of the country provide timber for use where quality is of little importance. But the big business is here on the coast."

"In that case," said Whiz, "if a syndicate controlled all of the pine on the west coast, it would virtually control the national output."

Ketterson nodded.

"That would amount to a monopoly."

"It would."

"Prices could be fixed sky high, and with no competition, they'd stay high."

Ketterson smiled. "Have you heard something about a lumber monopoly?"

"Yes," the columnist replied flatly. "I've heard a lot of rumors."

"Disregard them." Ketterson waved his hand. "There's nothing to them."

"There's no monopoly?"

"Nothing even resembling one." Ketterson talked smoothly and convincingly. "I'll admit the price of lumber has increased greatly in the past few years, but that's due to a number of things such as the increased cost of labor, machines, and transportation. Also the increased demand."

"I've heard," said Whiz, thinking of Halfpint Hoolihan, "of owners of timberland being swindled out of their property by a syndicate."

"There may be a few cases where men sold their property to a corporation and thought afterward that they should have received a higher price, but there's no such thing as a plot to gain a monopoly. If there were such a plot, I'd be the first to know about it."

"Would you?"

"Of course."

"A monopoly would have to be kept mighty secret to avoid government action," the columnist said. "Isn't it possible that a group of men might be working to form one without your knowledge?"

"No!" Ketterson was emphatic. "Some of my friends would surely know about it and they'd tell me. You just forget the rumors you've heard. There's nothing to them."

That closed the subject. Ketterson talked about his early days in the timberlands until Gulliver and Emma

Brandon returned to the den. A few minutes later, Tom and his friends said good night.

Tom drove the jeep and Gulliver sat at his side. Whiz, as usual, made himself as comfortable as possible in the cramped rear quarters.

"What did you think of Ketterson?" asked Whiz as Tom turned from the driveway into the street.

"I didn't like him," Tom replied frankly. "Of course, I hardly know him. But there was something about his eyes and the way he smiled—"

"He smiled," put in Gulliver, "with nothin' but his lips. His eyes an' the rest o' his face didn't change a smidge. A smile like that ain't real."

"Whiz, did you notice his eyes when you mentioned the monopoly?"

"Yes, Tom. They seemed to get a glassy expression. Ketterson's changed a lot since the last time I talked to him."

"The minute I shook hands with him, I sized him up as a critter who'd shilly-shally about givin' out any information. That's why I figured it'd be better to talk to Emma," Gulliver said.

"So that's why you wanted to see the kitchen!" Tom chuckled.

"That there Emma, she's genuine. I figured that havin' been a cook in a lumber camp, an' havin' lived here for the past ten years, she'd know blame near as much about the goin's on in the lumber business as Ket-

terson. An' she'd be a lot more likely to tell the true facts."

"According to Ketterson," said Whiz, "there is nothing to the rumors of a monopoly."

"I don't believe him," stated Gulliver.

"Did you learn anything from Emma Brandon?"

"She said there's somethin' big goin' on in the timberlands, but she didn't know what it is. Ketterson's had a lot o' phone calls from men in the lumber business."

"What about?"

"Emma didn't know, but she said Ketterson told the fellers who called to sit tight an' not worry." The big man's eyes narrowed beneath his heavy brows. "I know doggoned well there's a pack of crooks with a monopoly loose in the lumber country," he stated emphatically. "Halfpint Hoolihan said so, an' the Hoolihan ain't a man to lie."

CHAPTER 4

Grim Words

TOM QUEST and Whiz Walton occupied adjoining rooms in the hotel. Tom's room was a large one which he and his father had shared. Now that Hamilton Quest was gone, Gulliver used the extra bed.

Tom wakened at five o'clock in the morning. He yawned and stretched, then got out of bed and opened the window wide. The morning was clear and gave promise of a fine day for driving. A few deep breaths and he was wide awake. He crossed the room to the other bed and gripped Gulliver by the shoulder.

"Wake up, Gulliver. It's time to move."

Gulliver groaned and muttered something unintelligible.

"Are you going to sleep all day while Halfpint Hoolihan is waiting?"

"Huh? What's that yo' say?" Gulliver opened his

eyes. "Oh, Tom. Yo' up already?" He rubbed his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Five o'clock. You said you wanted to start out at six."

In an instant Gulliver was alert. "Five o'clock!" he exclaimed, throwing back the covers. "We got to git gittin'! Where's Whiz? I'll bet that lazy galoot is still poundin' his ear. Git him up. I'll be out o' the shower in two minutes." He padded barefooted into the bathroom and closed the door.

The columnist, unaccustomed to early rising, was much harder to rouse. Gulliver was showered, shaved, and fully dressed by the time Tom returned from the adjoining room and said, "I finally got him out of bed. He'll be dressed by the time I am."

"He better be or we'll go without him."

Tom grinned, knowing the threat was meaningless. "It might save time if you had our breakfasts sent here to the room," he suggested.

"Good idea. I'll do that same."

Tom had purchased blue jeans, a red and black flannel shirt, and heavy shoes, suitable for tramping through the forests. He put these on, then packed most of his clothing in a suitcase which he planned to leave in the hotel checkroom until he returned from Pine City. He was tying his shoes when two waiters arrived with hearty breakfasts, which they spread out on a table.

Gulliver snatched open the door to the adjoining

room. "Yo', Whiz!" he called. "Breakfast is here. Come an' eat it or we'll throw it out."

"All set," replied the columnist. He, too, was dressed for the woods in new clothing.

The route to Pine City was unmarked on most maps. There was no road in the sense of a travel lane that had been surveyed and graded. It was more like a path, northerly in direction and mostly uphill through the evergreen forest. It had probably begun as an animal trail in an era long past. It had no doubt been used by Indians on foot, later by white men on horseback, and still later by men who drove wagons. Wagons had broadened the road by adding ruts on the sides of the original paths, but advancing civilization had brought no further improvements. No one had seen fit to cut trees and clear away stumps to straighten the road, so it snaked back and forth just as the long-ago animals had done to avoid running head-on into trees.

Rains had washed away the soil in many places and left big roots protruding nakedly above the ground. There were holes as well as ruts. Low branches that extended over the trail made it necessary to be alert and ready to fend them aside to avoid a blow in the face.

The heavily loaded jeep bounced and sideswayed constantly. It was impossible to travel faster than a man could trot.

Gulliver drove silently and with admirable restraint.

In the back seat Whiz Walton had taken measures

to protect himself. He had rolled up the blankets and raincoats and tucked them around his hips and legs for padding.

Some of the trees had trunks nearly eight feet in diameter and Tom wondered about their age. He was reminded of a slab of wood he had once seen in a museum. It was a cross section from the trunk of a majestic redwood. The rings of growth had been labeled to show the size of that particular tree at various times in history. One ring indicated the redwood's size when General Washington spent the winter at Valley Forge. Another marked the year 1492. Even then, when Columbus set foot on the western hemisphere, the tree had been mature. It had been growing during the days of King Richard and the Crusades. And many trees still living were much older.

It was noon when Gulliver stopped the jeep at a gasoline pump in front of a general store called "Al's." A lanky man, probably Al himself, came out of the store. "Fill 'er up," said Gulliver.

"What's wrong with the gas in these cans?" demanded Whiz Walton. There were several of them, each holding five gallons. They took up much of the limited space behind the front seats.

"There's nothin' wrong with it," replied Gulliver. "We got to save that in case we run dry some place where there's no pump handy."

"The sooner the better," retorted the columnist.

"When we get rid of a few of these cans, I'll have some place to put my feet."

"Right now yo' can hoist yo' feet out an' put 'em on the ground. This is where we eat."

"Good!" said Tom, stepping out of the car.

"My legs," moaned Whiz.

"Cramped?" asked Tom.

"From toe to chin."

"Git out an' walk around," suggested Gulliver. "That'll take out the kinks." He reached over the side of the jeep and lifted out a paper-wrapped package about the size of a shoebox. "This," he explained, "is sandwiches. I figured we'd waste a lot o' time if we was to unpack the gear an' cook a meal, so I had the hotel make these up for us."

Whiz groaned and grunted as he disentangled his feet from the assortment of tools, tire chains, ropes, and other gear that filled the spaces not occupied by the reserve supply of gas and Gulliver's heavy medicine chest. Tom helped him out of the car.

Gulliver addressed the man who was pumping gas. "Yo' Al?"

"That's me," grinned the proprietor.

"We aim to sit in the shade o' that tree alongside yo' store an' eat. Yo' got any objections?"

"Help yerself. If you want food, I've got cold cuts, rolls—"

"We got food."

"Drinks to wash it down? I've got Coke, orange, root beer—"

"We'll let yo' know," interrupted Gulliver again.

Al hung up the hose and replaced the cap on the gas tank. "Check the oil?"

"Oil's O.K." Gulliver paid for the gasoline.

"Need any outdoor clothes or boots?"

"Nope."

"I carry a first-rate stock of hardware. If you need anything along that line—"

"If we do, we'll let yo' know."

"Do that. I'll be inside."

"Do you have candy bars?" asked Tom.

"Yep. All kinds."

"Then I'll go in with you." To Gulliver, Tom said, "You and Whiz start eating. I'll be with you in a couple of minutes."

Inside the store, he bought an assortment of candy, then took a map from his pocket. He unfolded it and spread it out on the counter. It was a large-scale map that he had bought the previous evening at the hotel newsstand. It embraced an area from San Francisco northward and showed the mountains in the western part of Glenn County where the town of Pine was located.

"Can you," asked Tom, "show me on this map where we are right now?"

"Sure thing." Al took a pencil from his pocket and

pointed to a meandering black line. "This is the road you're on. And here," the pencil pointed to a dot, "is where you're at. This is the town of Riley."

Tom's eyes widened in surprise. "This is a *town?*"

"We got a post office," grinned Al, gesturing to a wicket-enclosed corner of the store. "That's it. I'm postmaster. Men workin' in lumber camps around here have their mail sent to Riley." He added, "I'm Riley."

"The town's named after you?"

"Not me. It's named after my father. He built this place a good many years ago. I was born an' raised here. Went to Frisco for two years when I was twenty an' got married there. When my folks died, I brought my wife here an' we been here ever since." He pointed to a door in the rear wall of the store. "We live back there."

Tom suddenly realized that the gabby storekeeper might be a source of information. "You," he said, "must know most of the lumbermen around here."

"I know most of them who work this side of the Snake River."

"Ever hear of a man named Hoolihan?"

"Hoolihan?" The storekeeper pursed his lips and frowned thoughtfully for a moment.

"He's called 'Halfpint' Hoolihan," Tom said.

"The name don't ring a bell. I know I never handled any mail addressed to Hoolihan. Where's he located?"

"I think he owns property near Pine."

"That explains it," said Al, his face clearing. "That's

why I never heard of him. Pine's north of the Snake River."

"Maybe," said Tom hopefully, "you've heard of a syndicate that's trying to get a monopoly in the lumber industry."

Al dropped his eyes, opened a drawer beneath the top of the counter, and put away the money Tom had paid for the candy bars. "I," he began slowly, after an awkward pause, "don't know a darned thing about politics or the lumber business. So I don't talk about 'em."

The storekeeper could have answered Tom's question with a simple "No." Instead, he had replied with a carefully considered evasion. This indicated that he did know something about syndicate activities but would not discuss them. He wouldn't even admit that he had heard about a syndicate. Moreover, his relaxed sociability had given way to tenseness that seemed akin to fear. The smile was gone from his face and his pencil trembled slightly as he pointed to a wavy line on the map.

"This," he said, as if to change the subject, "is the Snake River. If you stay on this road and keep goin' north, you should reach the river by sundown." He paused, then without looking up, added, "If you don't get shot."

"Shot!" exclaimed Tom Quest. "By whom?"

"Ponderosa Pete."

"Who is Ponderosa Pete? Why would he shoot—"

"Sorry," cut in Al Riley. "I can't talk any longer. It's past mealtime and my wife don't like it if I'm late." He started toward the door to the living quarters. "If you or your friends want anything," he called over his shoulder, "just help yourself and leave the money on the counter."

The door in the back wall opened and closed. Tom was alone in the store. Slowly and thoughtfully he folded the map and returned it to his pocket while Al's words rang in his ears and questions assailed his brain.

"If you don't get shot!"

Why had Al said that? Was it because of the inquiry about a syndicate's activities? Had the words been meant as a friendly warning? Or a threat? Why had the storekeeper's manner changed? Why had he cut short the conversation on the flimsy pretense of going to lunch?

"Yo', Tom!" It was Gulliver shouting from somewhere outside. "Come on an' eat."

Impulsively Tom decided that nothing could be gained by telling his friends about the storekeeper's strange utterance. For the time being, at least, he would say nothing about it.

He left the store.

Whiz Walton stood with his back leaning against the trunk of the shade tree and Gulliver sat cross-legged on the grass. Both men were eating thick sandwiches.

"I bought some candy bars," Tom said as he sat down next to Gulliver.

The big man gestured toward an open box that held sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. "Dig in," he said. "Those were made accordin' to my special instructions. We got breast o' turkey, cold ham, crisp bacon, sliced tomato an' lettuce."

The wax wrappings were of three different colors. "Which is which?" asked Tom.

"The pink ones are seasoned with authority. They got hot pepper powder an' other things to give 'em flavor. They're for me. The white ones have milder seasonin' like yo' favor. The baby blue ones are for Whiz. They got nothin' on 'em but a smidge o' salt."

Tom laughed. "I mean, which ones are turkey?"

"They all got turkey in 'em. Likewise the other things I mentioned."

Gulliver had also provided a thermos jug of lemonade.

While eating, Tom spread his map out on the ground. "I showed this to Al," he said. "He told me we should reach Snake River by sundown."

"In this country," Gulliver said, "it gits dark mighty sudden after sundown."

"Where's the Snake River?" asked Whiz Walton, squatting on his haunches and eyeing the map.

Tom pointed it out. "And here," he said, "is the road we're on. It seems to cross Snake River and continue through the town of Pine."

"Must be a bridge."

"Probably. I didn't ask Al about that."

Gulliver frowned at the map. "I figure it'll take us six hours to reach Pine after we git across the river."

"That means we'll be traveling on this road after dark," said the columnist.

"Hoolihan's place is beyond Pine," Gulliver said. "We might have a hard time findin' it in the middle o' the night. I reckon we better figure on campin' when we reach the river. We'll go on at daybreak."

A short time later, the jeep once more rolled northward following the uphill road through deep forests of mighty trees. From time to time the sweet-smelling air held the sound of saws and axes operated by men who could not be seen in the dense timberland.

It was midafternoon when Tom saw the first sign. It was crudely lettered in red paint on a board that had been nailed to a tree. It said, "Private Property."

He saw the second sign ten minutes later and called it to Gulliver's attention. It said, "Property of Ponderosa Pete. Don't Trespass."

"Does that mean we're not supposed to use this road?" asked Tom.

Gulliver grunted, "Like to see anyone try to stop us."

Tom thought it might be well at this point to tell about the statement Al had made, but at that moment he saw a thin cord stretched across the road about a foot above the ground.

There was no time to stop the jeep, even if Gulliver had wanted to. The cord snapped across the radiator and a rifle cracked near by.

"Gunplay!" cried Whiz Walton, ducking low. "Are they shooting at us?"

The jeep leaped ahead as Gulliver floored the accelerator. "Hang on!" the big man bellowed above the engine's roar. "There's turns ahead an' we're takin' 'em fast!"

Tom had to shout to make himself heard. "I don't think anyone fired at us."

"I know gunplay when I hear it!" yelled Gulliver.

"That may have been a gun, but I think it was fired by the cord we broke through. Maybe it was rigged up to signal that someone was coming along the road."

Gulliver wrenched the steering wheel, whipping the jeep around a sharp curve. The wheels on one side left the ground. For a moment it seemed as though the car would capsize. But the wheels dropped back to the road and the jeep roared on. There was another turn ahead.

"Slow down!" cried Whiz Walton.

Gulliver slowed to negotiate the next turn on four wheels, then he jammed on the brakes. The tires skidded, sending up a cloud of dust.

Across the road ahead lay a tree with a trunk at least two feet in thickness. And beside the road a man stood with a rifle to his shoulder.

Vividly Tom remembered what Al Riley had said. "*You should reach the river by sundown . . . if you don't get shot.*"

CHAPTER 5

Ponderosa Pete

"Raise your hands!"

Tom Quest observed that the man who held the 30-30 Winchester to his shoulder was small in stature and past middle age. He had a drooping mustache and wore a battered felt hat, an unbuttoned mackinaw coat, and black corduroy trousers which were tucked into the boots that came nearly to his knees.

"I said, raise your hands, an' that means all three of you!"

Tom and Whiz Walton held their hands at shoulder level, but not Gulliver. He still gripped the steering wheel and glared angrily at the man beside the road. Tom heard him mutter, "If there's anythin' that gits my bristles up, it's to have someone sight a gun at me." He shouted, "Put down yo' smoke-pole, an' move that log out o' my way!"

"You three get out of that car an' stand with your hands high or I'll start shootin'."

"That does it. Now I *am* mad!" Gulliver scrambled out of his side of the jeep and started toward the stranger.

"Hold it, mister!" The rifle was pointed straight at Gulliver. "You come any closer an' I'll shoot!"

Gulliver kept advancing with long, purposeful strides.

"Stop, I tell you!" The man's voice had a higher pitch and the rifle barrel wavered.

"Yo' don't have enough sand in yo' craw to back up such big talk." Gulliver, a formidable figure, was just two strides away. "Yo're bluffin' an' yo' bluff is bein' called." He swung his huge hand and slapped aside the rifle, then snatched it from the small man's grip. "Yo' ain't to be trusted with shootin' irons."

Gulliver gripped the rifle with both hands, lifted it high, then slammed it down across his upraised knee with force enough to bend the barrel. Tossing the ruined firearm aside, he glowered at the dumbfounded man and rasped, "Now, I'll deal with yo'!"

Tom leaped out of the car, shouting, "Wait, Gulliver! That man's disarmed and helpless. Don't hurt him!"

Gulliver's voice indicated that the heat of his fury had been expended in the destruction of the rifle. "I don't aim to hurt the critter, Tom, unless he's stub-

born about answerin' questions." To the stranger, he said, "Did yo' figure on robbin' us?"

"Rob you!" repeated the other. "Do I look like a highway robber? I don't need to rob anyone! I own all the land an' timber this side of the Snake River."

"Are you Ponderosa Pete?" asked Tom quickly.

"How'd you guess?"

"I didn't guess. We saw your signs."

"If yo' didn't hanker to rob us, why'd yo' hold us at gunpoint an' threaten to shoot?" demanded Gulliver.

"I wanted to find out who you are an' why you're here."

"I don't see as it's any o' yo' business."

"It's my business if you're on the way to join up with the Daniels outfit to fight me." Ponderosa Pete had recovered from Gulliver's startling display of strength. He looked up and met the big man eye to eye without flinching. "I hanker to know who comes this way an' why."

"Did yo' drop that log across the road?"

"My men did it."

"Then yo' men better move it so's we c'n git past. Yo' may own this timber, but yo' don't own the road an' yo' got no right to block it off."

"It's not blocked. You can drive around the end of the log." This was true. A semicircular road, not readily apparent, had been cleared around the big log. "I had the log put there so anyone comin' by would have to stop an' give me the chance to ask questions."

Whiz Walton came from the jeep to join the group. "Someone fired at us a little way back," he said. "Do you know anything about that?"

"You weren't fired at. That was just one of my signals. It was a shotgun tied to a tree with a cord running from the trigger across the road. There's another one north of here. Anyone who passes fires the gun."

"And when you hear the gun, you come here with your rifle to ask questions. Is that it?"

Pete nodded a reply to the columnist. "I got a right," he said stubbornly, "to protect my property."

"Sure, yo' have," agreed Gulliver heartily.

Tom said, "You mentioned an outfit that was trying to fight you."

Pete nodded again. "Ron Daniels. He runs the biggest lumberin' camp in these parts. It's just north of the Snake River. Daniels poses as the owner, but I suspect he's a figurehead. I think the real owners—" He broke off suddenly.

"Go on," said Tom.

"Nope. Maybe I already said too much. I still don't know anything about you fellers." Pete glanced at his bent rifle lying on the ground. "And," he added, "I'm not in a position to ask questions an' get answers. Maybe you're on the way to work for Daniels."

"We never heard of him," Tom said.

"We're on our way to see a friend o' mine," put in Gulliver. "He's been havin' trouble with a syndicate."

"The syndicate!" exclaimed Ponderosa Pete.

"Polecats that're tryin' to steal his timberland," said Gulliver.

"What's his name?"

"Hoolihan."

"Halfpint?" cried Pete.

"Yo' know the Hoolihan?"

"You bet I do! He came to me some years ago lookin' for timberland he could buy at a fair price. I helped him find that property of his. Are you the Hoolihan's friend?"

"Yo're doggoned right I'm his friend! D'yo' think I'd come all the way from Texas to line up alongside him ag'in the syndicate if I weren't his friend? We prospected together in Mexico. We—"

"In Mexico!" cut in Pete. "He told me about that trip an' the partner he had. If you were his partner, your name's Gulliver."

"Yo' called it."

"Shake!"

Grinning widely, Gulliver gripped the hand of Ponderosa Pete. He formally introduced Tom and Whiz, then picked up the bent rifle. "I'm downright sorry about this. When I git into a sod-pawin' mood, I kind o' forgit myself."

"I'm glad you didn't pick me up an' bust *me* across your knee!" laughed Pete. "For a minute, I thought that's what you were goin' to do."

"First chance I git, I'll buy yo' a new rifle."

"Forget it, Gulliver. I got plenty more at the house."

Pete turned to Tom. "Now that I know you gents aren't workin' for Daniels, I'll finish what I started to say."

"You think Daniels is a figurehead?"

"Right!" replied Ponderosa Pete emphatically. "I think he's just a front man. I think there's a syndicate behind him. An outfit that's tryin' to grab up all the timberland around here—includin' mine. It's a squeeze play to get a monopoly on pine lumber, then jack up the price."

Whiz Walton spoke. "We heard rumors that a syndicate was trying to get a monopoly, but we were told there's nothing to them."

"Who told you that?"

"Ketterson."

"Hogwash!"

"Do you know Ketterson?"

"Never met him," said Pete, "but I know who he is. I've heard plenty about him."

"He's supposed to be an authority on the lumber industry."

"He may've been an authority a few years ago, before he retired from business. He's been out of touch with things for a long time."

In a manner calculated to bring out further information, the newshound argued, "He says his friends who are still in the business keep him informed."

"He told you there was no monkeyshines goin' on around here?"

"That's what he told us."

Pete looked at Gulliver. "Do you think the Hoolihan would agree with him?"

"Not by a jugful!"

"Ketterson don't know what he's talkin' about," Pete said decisively. "You should hear about the shenanigans that are goin' on."

"We'd like to," said Tom.

"I've got an idea. You three spend the night at my place and we'll have lots of time to talk. I've got plenty of beds."

"That's a swell idea!" enthused Whiz Walton. "Isn't it, Tom? We might get some valuable information. Furthermore," he added wistfully, "it'll be much better than camping on the bank of the Snake River and sleeping on the cold, hard ground."

"You planned to camp for the night?"

"Yes."

"Then that settles it. You'll bunk with me. I'll walk ahead. You follow in your car an' I'll show you where to turn off the road to reach my house." Pete took the bent rifle that Gulliver still held. "I'll keep this," he said, "as a souvenir."

CHAPTER 6

Schemes of a Syndicate

Nosing the jeep past the big log, Gulliver followed Ponderosa Pete along the road for a short distance, then to the left on a branching road that ended in a wide clearing. The house stood in the center of the clearing. It was a rambling, one-story structure made of unpeeled logs.

Pete, waiting at the door, grinned as Gulliver halted the jeep and turned off the ignition. "This is it," he said.

Tom pointed to a long, narrow building at the edge of the clearing. "What's that?"

"My guards live there."

"Guards?"

"Yes. I have eight of them. They work in shifts to keep a twenty-four hour watch on my timber."

"A watch for what?" asked Whiz Walton.

"Intruders, troublemakers, and fires."

"Is it necessary to maintain a watch like that?"

"It sure is. Especially now when Daniels is likely to make trouble."

"If those guards had been with yo' when yo' held a rifle on us," grinned Gulliver, "we'd 'a' had a downright lively time."

Pete shuddered at the thought of Gulliver's mighty strength unleashed in full-fledged combat. "They probably didn't even hear the shotgun signal," he said. "They patrol around the edge of my holdings. And that reminds me. I must tell the boys on the next shift to reload the shotgun an' fix the string when they go on duty."

"Don't you cut any trees?" asked Tom.

"Plenty. The camp's about two miles from here. Got quite a layout. Come on inside."

Tom and Whiz took their kits of toilet articles out of the jeep and Gulliver unloaded his ironbound chest.

"What's that?" asked Pete.

"My medicine chest."

"Great scott! If you need a chest that size to hold medicine, you must be ailin' with everything that's in the book!"

"It holds things beside medicine," replied Gulliver calmly. "Yo'll see when I open 'er up."

Pete led his guests through a comfortable living room to a large bedroom that had double-deck bunks built against two of the walls. "How's this?" he asked. "If you-all want a lower bunk, I've got another spare room."

"I'll sleep in an upper," Tom said. "I like them."

Gulliver had placed his chest in the middle of the floor. He unlocked it and threw back the heavy lid.

He took the chest with him wherever he went. It was a relic of the past; one of the type that had been standard equipment on sailing vessels in the days when the captain had to serve as physician and surgeon for the crew and passengers. It still held the original jars and bottles, each identified by a number, but Gulliver had replaced the old-fashioned medicines and remedies with modern aids for the cure of disease, the protection of health, and the treatment of injury. And there were many items that had not the remotest connection with the practice of medicine or first aid. Boot grease, for example, yellow soap that Gulliver used to wash his clothes, and nitro-solvent for cleaning his guns. The chest held gun oil, binoculars, knives, lengths of cord and rope, coils of wire, a few loose sticks of dynamite with fuse and percussion caps for firing it, spare shoelaces and razor blades, flashlights—the list was endless. With his chest at hand, Gulliver was prepared to meet any emergency. Also in the chest be carried staples such as flour, salt, pepper, and baking powder as well as a large assortment of the spices, herbs, vinegars, and oils that he favored in his cooking.

But now he was interested only in a huge revolver of forty-five caliber. He took it out with a holster and a gunbelt filled with cartridges.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Ponderosa Pete.

"Wear it," replied Gulliver, strapping the belt around his hips. "From now on I'll feel a mite better if I'm carrying' a weapon."

"You carry a couple of good ones on the ends of your arms."

Gulliver looked at his huge fists. "These," he said, "are all right for close work, but my six-gun's got more authority at long range." He closed and locked the chest.

Supper was well prepared and served by an Oriental named Wong who beamed when the guests complimented him on his cooking. After the meal, Pete sent Wong to the bunkhouse to tell the guards that the shotgun signal needed resetting.

"Now," Pete leaned back in his chair, "I reckon you want to hear what's been goin' on in the timber country."

"What has the syndicate been doing?" Tom asked.

"Grabbin' timberland. If they can't buy it at their own price, they use other ways to get it. I know of at least five men who were done out of their timber with hardly a dime to show for it."

"What about the law?" asked Tom.

"Those crooks handle their dealin's so the law can't touch 'em."

"For example?"

"Well, Clem Archer is a good example. Clem had some timberland on top of the mountain west of here. One day a skinny, meek-lookin' man came along an' said he'd like to buy the property. Clem didn't care about sellin', so he named a price that was about three times what the land an' timber was worth. The skinny critter said the price seemed high, but claimed he didn't know anything about land values in that part of the country, so he reckoned it was all right. Besides the land was just what he an' his wife had been wantin'. He said he'd think it over, an' went away. Clem figured he'd heard the last of him, but that wasn't the case.

"The gent came back the next day, bringin' a lawyer with him. The lawyer had drawn up a paper called a 'Land Contract.' The deal called for the payment of two hundred dollars in cash to Clem, with the balance to be paid in ninety days. It looked like a mighty good proposition to Clem, because he'd keep the title to the land until the full amount was paid. An', as I said, it was a real substantial amount. But if the balance wasn't paid in ninety days, the whole thing was called off, an' Clem kept the two hundred dollars. He didn't see how he could lose, so he signed the Land Contract an' called in some of his men to witness it.

"The buyer an' the lawyer went away. A few days later they both came back, bringin' with 'em a lot of pack mules, wagons, tools, an' equipment, an' about a hundred lumberjacks."

"I can guess what they did after that," Whiz Walton said.

Pete nodded. "They went to work like a swarm of locusts. They built flumes an' started cuttin' the best timber an' skiddin' it downhill to the valley where Ron Daniels had a mill for handlin' it. Clem argued an' fought, but it didn't do no good. The buyer had that Land Contract, an' accordin' to one of the terms, he was to have free use of the place durin' the ninety-day period."

"Clem should have gone to court," said Whiz. "I'm sure he could have gotten an injunction to stop the work."

"He did," Pete said. "He went to court with a lawyer. After waitin' for a long time, his case was heard an' threshed out. Clem got a court order to stop those men from cuttin' the timber. But by that time it was too late. All of the timber had been cut an' moved. Needless to say, Clem never got the balance of his money."

"Then he still owns the land," said Tom.

"He owns the land, but it's practically worthless. Those crooks in the syndicate got about ten thousand dollars worth of timber for a measly two hundred dollars!"

"How do yo' know a syndicate was behind the deal?" Gulliver asked.

"All the little things that add up," replied Ponderosa Pete. "I'd bet my life a syndicate is at work, but I couldn't go before a judge with anything that'd *prove* it."

"I know what yo' mean."

"Were other men tricked the way Clem Archer was?" asked Tom.

"Not that I know of, Tom. But I know Ron Daniels blackmailed a man into sellin' his land dirt cheap, and there've been a couple of cases where men have been scared into sellin' by threats of violence. One feller was told point blank that if he didn't sell, his wife would have a serious accident."

"D'yo' know what the Hoolihan is up against?" Gulliver asked.

Pete shook his head. "I didn't even know he was in trouble. I've been busy worryin' about my own timberland."

Whiz Walton spoke. "Is Daniels after it?"

"He's the one who's tryin' to close a deal, but I think he's just the front man for the syndicate. He made the first offer a couple of weeks ago. It was about a tenth of what the property is worth. I turned him down flat. A week ago, he made the second offer, uppin' the price a shade. I turned him down again. Yesterday, Zack Vinton came over from the north side of the Snake to call on me."

"Who is he?" It was Tom who asked the question.

"Zack Vinton is a sort of general manager for Daniels. He runs the office, makes out the payroll, an' handles a lot of details. He's a mean-lookin' critter, with eyes like a snake. He said Daniels had sent him to make me a final offer, an' he said I'd be smart to accept it. I told him I wasn't sellin' out at any price. He told me I'd be sorry. Then he left. Now I'm waitin' to see what happens next."

"What do you expect to happen?"

"Well, Whiz, I don't know. I don't know what'll happen to me, but I'll never forget the things that happened to Sam Slavin. Daniels tried to buy him out for a low price. He made two offers, then Zack Vinton called, same as he did here, an' made the final offer. Sam turned it down. Then things began to happen in Sam's camp."

"What things?" Gulliver demanded.

"A couple of Sam's mules died sudden. It looked like a case of poisonin', but it couldn't be proved. Then his flumes got smashed, cables on the winches snapped. One thing after another. Sam was sure that some of his lumber crew were bein' paid by Daniels to cause all the accidents, but he couldn't find out who they were. He finally got discouraged an' sold out to Daniels."

"At Daniels' price?" Whiz asked.

"Yes."

Whiz had been writing in a small notebook. "How many men does Daniels employ?" he said.

"There's between a hundred an' a hundred an' twenty men workin' in his camp."

"Whew! That's a lot of men to fight."

"Most of them," said Pete, "are plain lumberjacks workin' at the standard scale of pay. They'll do their job an' do it right, but they wouldn't go along with any underhanded dirty work. Probably only a dozen or so of the men are helpin' Daniels in his crooked schemes. But a dozen's all he needs."

"By thunder!" Gulliver spoke suddenly and explosively. "If it's Daniels who's makin' trouble for the Hoolihan—"

"Might be," said Pete. "On the other hand, it might be someone else. I understand the syndicate's got several 'front' men workin' like Daniels, posin' as the owners of lumber camps an' buyin' up the smaller outfits."

Gulliver became thoughtful.

"Things around here are bad," Pete finished sadly. "Mighty bad."

"Don't worry, Pete," Gulliver said grimly. "There's ways o' changin' 'em for the better."

CHAPTER 7

Plotters' Conference

NIGHT SHROUDED Ron Daniels' lumber camp in the woods about a mile north of the Snake River. Saws, axes, and machines were silent and the men who operated them were asleep in the dark bunkhouses. But in the office, a shack set apart from the other buildings, oil lamps were burning. The room was furnished with a flat desk, a swivel desk chair, a couple of bent wood chairs, and a metal file cabinet.

Ron Daniels leaned back in his desk chair and pushed his wide-brimmed Stetson higher on his forehead. He wore highly polished boots and whipcord riding breeches which, like his fine shirt and suede jacket, had been expensively tailored to fit his tall, well-built figure. "Vinton," he said, "we must do something about Ponderosa Pete."

Vinton nodded slowly. His small, black, close-set

eyes were fixed on a large map thumbtacked to the wall. He was a short, stocky man with a swarthy complexion and he needed a shave. "I knew," he said, "before I went to his place yesterday, that he'd turn down your final offer."

"I didn't expect him to sell out at my price, but it was a matter of routine to make the final offer. We'll have to apply pressure to him and I'm open to suggestions. Have you anything in mind?"

"Plenty." Vinton took off his old hat, placed it on a corner of the desk, and ran stubby fingers through his long black hair. "Pete's one of the most important men around here. The other owners of timberland look up to him."

"I'm aware of that. That's why we must secure his property. If he sells out, we'll have no trouble with the others."

"Pete ought to have a forest fire."

"Are you out of your mind?" Daniels snapped.

"Nope. I got it all thought out."

"A forest fire!"

"Listen, Daniels. The Snake River divides his land from ours. Durin' the spring floods, the river overflows the banks an' spreads out over the valley for about a quarter of a mile. Because of that, there's no trees close to the river. That open space would keep the fire from spreadin' to this side."

"I'm not thinking about the fire spreading to this property. I'm thinking how it'll destroy Pete's timber.

It's his *timber* I want. Not a lot of burned-over mountainside. If that's your best idea—"

"Hold on." Vinton moved to the wall map and pointed to areas that had been shaded with a pencil. "Look at these tracts of timber," he said. "There's fifteen places we're tryin' to buy. In every one of those deals we're at a standstill because our offers have been turned down."

"I know that," Daniels replied irritably. "The big boss is getting impatient about those deals. He wants them closed."

"That's the point. We've got to do something to let the owners of that land know they'd better take what they can get. We burn out Ponderosa Pete, then hint to the others that their timber is mighty dry, an' there's likely to be more fires. They'll realize that if Pete can't defend himself, they've got no chance to, either."

"You mean sacrifice Pete's timber so we can get the rest?"

"That's the idea."

"It seems like a drastic measure—"

"It strikes me that it's called for. If we don't move fast, we'll get no more timberland than we got right now. That wouldn't suit the boss."

"No," Daniels agreed, "it wouldn't. But I don't think your plan will work."

"I think it will. I've got all the details worked out."

"You've overlooked one thing."

"Huh?"

"The men who work here."

"What about them?"

"I'll tell you what about them," Daniels retorted heatedly. "We have about a hundred lumberjacks here in camp, men who have spent most of their lives in big timber. Most of them have been through forest fires and some have suffered injury. They've seen men and animals trapped and burned to death. They know how destructive a forest fire can be and how fast one can spread. Those men consider forest fire their greatest enemy and they'll drop everything to fight one no matter where it occurs."

"I know that." Vinton nodded.

"Then you must be able to understand why your plan won't work. Our men would quickly notice smoke rising above the trees. They'd know what it meant and rush over the Snake River to fight the fire. They'd have it out before it got well started."

Vinton's lips turned back in a grin that exposed his tobacco-stained teeth. "I thought of all that," he said. "And I thought of a way to keep our men from puttin' out the fire."

"How?"

"By keepin' them on this side of the Snake River."

"How," snapped Daniels, "do you propose to do that?"

"Easy," replied the short, stocky man. "We just destroy the bridge."

Ron Daniels was silent for a moment. "Destroy the bridge," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Have you looked at the Snake River durin' the past week?"

"No. Why?"

"It's high. The water's right up to the top of the banks an' flowin' fast. It would take a mighty strong swimmer to get across without the bridge. And even if a man could swim across, he couldn't carry any tools for fightin' a forest fire."

"I dare say very few of the lumberjacks are expert swimmers."

"That's right, Daniels. To reach the fire, they'd have to go down or upstream a long way to find a place where they could cross the Snake. Or they'd have to build a new bridge. In either case, the fire would be out of control before they could start fightin' it."

"The idea," Daniels said grudgingly, "has merit."

"It'll work," Vinton replied. "We blow up the bridge an' start fires in Pete's timber. That's all we got to do. After Pete's burned out, I'll call on the men who've been stubborn about sellin' out. I guarantee I'll close those deals without any more trouble."

"You'll need some men to carry out your plans."

"We got 'em on the payroll. Don't worry about that. I'll get Gimp an' Lefty up at daybreak an' give 'em their instructions."

CHAPTER 8

The Enemy Moves

GULLIVER WAKENED before daybreak and eased himself silently off the bunk. In the darkness he gathered up his clothes and gunbelt, then left the bedroom and closed the door. He dressed quietly in the living room and was tying the laces of his boots when the beam of a flashlight stabbed toward him. He reached for his gun. It was half out of the holster when the familiar voice of Ponderosa Pete came from behind the blinding light.

"Oh," said Pete. "It's you."

"Keep yo' voice low, Pete," Gulliver replied softly. "I don't want to wake up Tom an' Whiz."

The light went out. Pete was an indistinct form as he crossed the big room toward Gulliver. He spoke in a low voice. "What in tarnation are you doin' up at this hour?"

"I got some business to take care of. Now, Pete, I'm

askin' yo' the same question. What're yo' doin' up?"

"I heard you movin' around."

"Yo' sure sleep light."

"I," replied Pete, "sleep light an' wake up curious. What kind of business can you transact at four o'clock in the morning?"

"It'll be plenty later by the time I git to where I aim to transact my business. I'm goin' to call on Ron Daniels."

"Why?"

"I hanker to ask him some questions about the syndicate an' find out if he's mixed up in the plot against the Hoolihan."

"Is that any reason why you got to sneak out in the middle of the night?"

"There's plenty o' reason, Pete. I don't want Tom an' Whiz to know about this business."

"Why not?" Pete demanded.

"Because they'd want to go with me." Gulliver buckled on his gunbelt, then drew his gun from the holster, spun the cylinder and dropped it back. "This particular conference," he said pointedly, "might git rough, an' I don't want Tom an' Whiz to git hurt."

"If it gets rough you might be able to use some help."

"Maybe so."

"Well, then—" Pete began.

"Tom an' Whiz would put up a good fight," Gulliver

interrupted, "but they'd fight *clean*. I got a hunch that Daniels an' his pals are the kind o' critters that pay no attention to the rules o' clean fightin'."

"They'll fight dirty all right," Pete agreed. "They'd shoot a man in the back. They'd kick his teeth in while he's lyin' helpless."

"About what I figured."

"I can't let you go there alone, Gulliver."

Gulliver's voice had a raw edge. "Are yo' thinkin' o' tryin' to stop me?"

"I'm thinkin' of goin' with you."

"Oh. Well, if yo' want to cut yo'self a slice o' this, come right along."

"Give me two minutes to pull on some clothes and I'll be with you."

"Two minutes. No more."

"Goin' in your car?"

"No. If I start up that engine, Tom an' Whiz'll wake up. They'll figure out where we've gone an' come tailin' after us."

"That's so," Pete nodded.

"We'll go on foot. Now hurry an' git yo' clothes on. I'll wait for yo' outside."

At that moment, in Ron Daniels' lumber camp, Zack Vinton and three other hard-faced men were tying certain items behind the saddles of two horses. In addition to a pair of unprincipled characters known as

Lefty and Gimp, Vinton had enlisted the aid of a man whose beaklike nose inspired the nickname, Hawk. All four men wore guns in holsters.

"As near as I can learn," Vinton said, "Ponderosa Pete's guards are spread out so you're not likely to meet more'n one of them at a time."

"If," said Lefty, "me an' Gimp run across one of those guards, we'll take care of the critter." He tapped his gun significantly. The handle of the weapon had been notched five times and each notch was a grim memento that told of a man with whom Lefty had dealt in the past.

"Watch yourselves," warned Vinton. "We don't want the law to get evidence against any of the men on our payroll."

"No one's ever got evidence against us," Lefty replied. "An' no one ever will."

"Another thing, Lefty. If you have to get rid of one of the guards, be careful what you do with the body. It won't do for one of Pete's men to be found dead with a bullet hole in his hide."

"You needn't tell me that," Lefty said. "If me an' Gimp have to gun someone, we'll make sure to put the corpse where it'll be burned by the forest fire. Won't we, Gimp?"

"Yeah, sure thing," the man named Gimp replied.

Vinton inventoried the things that had been tied behind the saddles. "Got everything you need?" he asked as he counted the square cans that were filled

with gasoline. "Plenty of gas," he remarked. "What about blasting-powder fuse?"

"In my saddlebag," Lefty said. "And I've got plenty of matches."

"All the food you'll need?"

"All we need."

"Then I guess you're all set. Remember what you're to do, Lefty. You're to spill the gasoline in half a dozen places. Run a long line of fuse into the gasoline and light it."

As Lefty nodded, Vinton continued, "Light the longest fuse first, then the next longest and so on. If you do it right, fires'll break out in half a dozen places at just about the same time. After you've got the fuses lighted, you just keep ridin' south. Cross Pete's land and keep goin' south."

"I'd like it better if we came back here to the camp," Lefty argued.

"You can't come back," Vinton replied. "By the time you get the fires started, there'll be no bridge left. You'll have to keep goin'." He drew a roll of bills from his pocket and slipped off the rubber band that held the roll together. "I'll pay you two now," he said. "Then you won't have to worry about collectin' your money."

As he counted off bills of large denomination, he warned, "Don't get any double-cross ideas. I'm payin' you before you do your job, because there's no other way to handle it. But if you don't start those fires, we'll

find you and take back this cash. What's more, we'll take it back with interest, and that interest will come out of your hides."

"Don't worry," Lefty said. "We'll start the fires." He put his share of the money into his pocket. "But we could do a better job if we had another man helpin'. Why not let Hawk come with us?"

"Hawk's got to help me blow up the bridge."

"We'll make out without him," said Gimp. "Let's go, Lefty."

The two men mounted their horses and rode south toward the Snake River and the stand of timber that lay beyond.

Zack Vinton turned to Hawk. "Are we ready to shove on?"

"We're ready," replied the hook-nosed man.

Vinton eyed a burlap sack tied behind Hawk's saddle. "Do you think fifty pounds of dynamite is enough?"

"Plenty. Twenty pounds would be enough to blow up that bridge. Let's get goin'. It'll soon be daylight."

Vinton mounted and said, "*Giddap!*"

CHAPTER 9

Prelude to Destruction

DAWN LIGHTED the eastern horizon when Zack Vinton and Hawk reined up and dismounted near the bridge that spanned the Snake River.

Vinton reached for the short-handled spades tied behind his saddle. "We'll leave the dynamite where it is," he said, "until we've got the holes dug."

The bridge was a simple span. The main supports had been made by stripping the bark off two fifty-foot lengths of tree trunk. These beams, nearly two feet in diameter, extended from one bank of the river to the other. The ends of each log were anchored by iron straps to heavy stakes driven deep into the solid ground. The gaps between the logs were covered by heavy planks held in place by long spikes. There were no side rails.

The bridge was crude, but solid, and wide enough to accommodate a bulldozer.

The bridge had been built after the last spring flood had subsided. It would probably be swept away like all the former bridges when spring brought more flood waters. The lumbermen considered the building of a bridge a simple part of spring routine and had become proficient at the chore.

Vinton had supervised the building of the bridge and now he aided Hawk in readying its destruction. The men dug a hole in the ground close to the north end of the structure, then crossed over and dug a second hole in the bank on the opposite side.

By that time daylight was well advanced. In the gray light before sunrise, the water, rushing with speed enough to churn up white foam, looked mean and menacing. It was high enough to splash the bottom side of the bridge; almost high enough to overflow the perpendicular banks.

"Now," said Vinton, "let's get the dynamite."

Hawk dumped it out of the burlap sack and tossed the empty sack into the stream. "I already got it bundled," he said. "I thought that'd save a little time."

There were eight bundles, each containing about a dozen sticks of the explosive tied together with a length of cord.

"We'll put four bundles in each hole," said Vinton. "Where's the fuse an' percussion caps?"

"In my saddlebag." Hawk produced a coil of fuse which, in appearance, looked like clothesline, and a small tin box that held the highly explosive cylinders containing the mercury fulminate. "How much fuse should I cut off?"

"Two lengths, each about four feet."

Hawk drew a knife from his belt and cut off the lengths of fuse. Then he fitted a percussion cap over one end of each fuse.

Meanwhile, Zack Vinton had used a pointed stick to poke a hole into one of the sticks of dynamite. Into this hole he fitted the capped end of a fuse. Then he handed the fused explosive to his partner. "Plant this in the hole on the far side," he said, "an' put three more bundles on top of it. Then fill in the hole with dirt. I'll plant the blast on this side."

When both blasts were set, the eastern sky had a red glow from the sun that would soon appear.

Vinton looked at his watch. "Lefty and Gimp," he said, "have had plenty of time to get deep into the timber. We'll touch off the blasts an' see some fireworks."

Hawk grinned. "I'll bet this bridge goes a mile high."

"At least it'll *go*," replied Vinton. He spat into the angry water. "I guarantee none of the men in our camp will cross this stream to put out the fire in Pete's timber."

Lefty and Gimp had entered the forest some distance west of the road, so they were not seen by Pete and Gulliver, who walked along the rutted lane.

Pete was hard pressed to keep pace with Gulliver's long strides. "When you see Daniels," he said, "what're you goin' to talk about?"

"I'm goin' to start by askin' what he knows about a crooked syndicate. What happens after that'll depend on how he answers."

"You can't make charges against Daniels without proof to back 'em up. You can't bluff men like Daniels an' Zack Vinton. They don't bluff worth a cent. Anyone who tries to throw a bluff on them will be called every time."

"In country like this," Gulliver replied, "a man who can be bluffed don't git far. I don't aim to try no bluffin' game. I figure on talkin' to Daniels an' stirrin' things up. There's times when a situation o' this sort is like a hole full o' muddy water. Yo' never know what's down at the bottom unless yo' poke into the water an' give 'er a stir."

Pete chuckled. "You've got somethin' there."

The air was cool and enriched by the fragrance of the evergreens on both sides of the narrow road. Presently the two men reached the edge of the forest. The ground ahead dipped gently, then rose on the other side of the Snake River. The valley was covered with small, stunted growth, mostly shrubs and wild grass. The Snake, flowing through the center of the valley,

was a raging torrent that gave out a roar of defiance and warning.

The terrain was lighted by the reddish glow from the eastern sky.

"In the spring," Pete explained, "the river comes over the banks an' sometimes widens out to cover this whole valley."

Gulliver nodded. "The way it looks, it wouldn't take much more water to make it overflow right now."

"It's higher than usual. You can see there'd be precious little hope of crossin' if the bridge wasn't there."

"I note," said Gulliver, "that the road continues on the far side o' the bridge. Does it go all the way to Pine?"

"Yep. There's a branchin' road that leads to the Daniels camp."

"Yo' land ends at the river?" Gulliver asked.

"Yep. The land the syndicate owns starts at the north bank of the river. The river's the dividin' line."

At that moment lighted fuses, one at either end of the bridge, carried a tiny spark of fire toward dynamite. And the men who had planted the explosive crouched behind boulders to watch the destruction of the bridge.

CHAPTER 10

The Blast

WALKING ACROSS the open valley toward the bridge, Gulliver became increasingly aware of the seething river's steady roar.

"You see why the bridge is important," Pete said. "That river's only about forty feet across, but it's the roughest stretch of water you ever saw!"

"How deep is it?" asked Gulliver.

"Well, when the water's down to normal level, it's about eight feet deep, with a couple of feet of bank risin' on each side above the water. Now the water's right up to the bank. I'd say it must be about ten feet deep."

Gulliver nodded absently. Something had caught his sharp eye. "Wait!" he said suddenly.

"You needn't worry about the bridge. It don't look like much, but it's plenty solid."

"I wasn't thinkin' o' the bridge, Pete. I was thinkin' about some footprints." Gulliver pointed to the ground near the end of the bridge. "Look there," he said. "There've been horses here since daybreak."

Pete frowned as he looked at the ground. "How d'you know they've been here that recent?" he asked.

"Watch the grass. It's been pressed down within the past half hour, an' by critters that rode from the far side o' the bridge."

Even as they watched, the long blades of lush growth moved slowly toward the perpendicular.

"Some o' that grass," said Gulliver, "was broken. Some was just bent down. The bent-down grass is springin' back."

"I don't like this," grumbled Ponderosa Pete. "Anyone who comes from the far side of the river is from the syndicate's camp. That means they ain't friends of mine. Cut some more sign, Gulliver, an' tell me what else you see."

After a moment's scrutiny, Gulliver said, "There was two horses crossed the bridge an' went on into yo' timber. Yo' c'n see two sets o' tracks movin' over that way."

Pete's frown deepened.

"Offhand," Gulliver added, "I'd guess the horses had riders."

"They got no business in my timber!" said Pete. "I told 'em to keep off this side of the river an' keep out of that forest."

"Maybe those horsemen are just travelers, headin' south from Pine."

"And maybe," snapped Pete, "they're somethin' else! If they're plain travelers, why didn't they stay on the road? I wish we didn't have to go to that syndicate camp right now. I'd like to follow those tracks for a little ways."

"Yo' follow 'em. I'll go on to see Ron Daniels."

"I'd sure like to know who's ridin' through my timber," Pete muttered. "I'd like to follow those tracks. But I hate like blazes to let you go alone to call on Daniels."

"Might be better," replied Gulliver, "if I went alone. When I get into a real argument, I need room to spread my loop. If things git lively durin' my meetin' with Daniels, an' I start swingin' my fists, I'd hate to have yo' clutterin' up the situation, gittin' in my way. Yo' go follow those horse tracks an' I'll go on to Daniels' place. I'll see yo' later at yo' place, an' we'll compare notes."

"All right," Ponderosa Pete agreed. He walked away, angling toward the woods in the tracks made by the horses ridden by Gimp and Lefty.

From behind a rock on the opposite side of the river, Zack Vinton and Hawk watched Pete and Gulliver. They saw Pete disappear among the trees while Gulliver approached the bridge.

"That dynamite," said Hawk in a tense voice, "is due to go off!"

"That's what it's there for," Zack Vinton replied.

"But the man headin' for the bridge," Hawk protested. "He might be killed!"

"If he's near the bridge when the dynamite explodes, you can bet your last dime he'll be killed. What of it?"

"I'm goin' to yell out to warn him."

Vinton drew his gun quickly and held it close to Hawk's side. "Nothin' of the kind," he snapped. "You're stayin' out of sight an' keepin' your mouth shut!"

"Blowin' up a bridge is one thing, Zack! Killin' a man's somethin' else! Let me tell him to get away!"

"Sit down! He's already on the bridge."

Hawk's eyes, peering over the top of the sheltering rock, were wide and staring. His face was beaded with sweat. He saw Gulliver pause in the middle of the bridge and gaze down at the rushing water.

Then Gulliver resumed his trip. He reached the northern end of the bridge. He had walked about fifty yards farther when the first charge of dynamite exploded.

Gulliver heard an ear-splitting roar and felt the earth shake beneath his feet. He looked back. Through an expanding cloud of yellow smoke, he saw the bridge standing on one end. Then it seemed to leap into the air as the second charge of dynamite exploded. The shock wave struck Gulliver with force enough to knock him off his feet. He was stunned, bewildered, and dizzy. Brilliant blotches of color danced crazily

before his eyes and the whole world seemed to be a wildly spinning ball of fire and smoke.

He closed his eyes and pressed his face against the ground, trying desperately to keep from slipping into a void of unconsciousness. He heard the thud of wreckage falling on all sides as the wave of giddiness subsided. Looking up, he saw the cloud of smoke drifting away. Then, for the first time, he fully understood what had happened.

He got to his feet and eyed the place where the bridge had been. "I hanker to know," he muttered, "who blew up that there bridge, an' *why!* If that was a move to git me out o' the way, someone is sure goin' to be sorry!"

"Stand still an' h'ist your hands!"

Gulliver turned quickly toward the voice, and saw two men approaching with guns drawn.

The short, stocky man said, "Make a fast move an' we'll shoot." He continued before Gulliver could reply. "Take his gun, Hawk."

At another time, anyone who tried to disarm Gulliver would have been engulfed by arms like tree trunks, but now the big man was still slightly dazed by the blast and shock. His brain was working slowly and his muscles were sluggish in their responses. Before he could make any move of resistance, the man with the beak-like nose had taken the gun from his holster and stepped back.

"You'll have to pay for blowin' up that bridge," the stocky man said.

Gulliver finally found his voice. "Yo'—yo' tryin' to say I blew up that bridge?"

"Yes."

The outlandish injustice of the accusation enraged Gulliver. The increased surge of blood rushing through his veins made his face flush, and washed the cobwebs from his brain. "Yo' lyin' polecat!" he rasped. "Yo'll take that back!"

"Hold it!" Zack Vinton brought up his gun so it pointed straight to a spot between the big man's eyes. "You got anything to say, you say it to Mr. Daniels."

"Daniels," repeated Gulliver. "He's the man I hanker to see!"

"We're takin' you to him. Walk over there," Vinton gestured with his head, "to where we left our horses. You'll walk ahead of us to the camp."

CHAPTER 11

Gulliver in Action

After his one explosive outburst, Gulliver managed to keep his anger under control. Though seething with resentment at being accused of blowing up the bridge, he walked north along the road with the two armed men following closely on their horses.

The empty holster on the big man's thigh seemed like a symbol of defeat. It was the first time in his life that Gulliver had been deprived of his gun. It was an indignity that stung.

Zack Vinton broke a long period of silence. "There's a branchin' road just ahead," he called. "That's where you turn."

Gulliver made no reply. Soon after turning onto the branching road, he saw the many phases of a lumber camp in operation. There were air-saw men, cutting

logs into shorter lengths, then passing them on to peelers. The peelers used broad-bladed axes to strip the bark from the underside of logs before rolling them toward the flume to be skidded downhill to the mill. Gulliver saw drivers with their mules, dragging the logs to the camp; the scaler with his measuring stick, and the swampers. Then, just ahead, he saw the small building with a sign above the door. The sign said, "Office."

"Stop right there!" said Vinton. It was spoken as a command. Gulliver bristled but obeyed. He waited until his captors had dismounted, then asked, "Is Daniels inside?"

"Yeah. Go on in."

Vinton and Hawk followed the big man into the office.

Gulliver's eyes rested on a lean man seated in a swivel chair behind a flat-top desk. He recognized the man from Pete's description.

"Yo' Daniels?"

"Yes. Who are you?" Daniels eyes moved from the big man's face to his empty holster. Then to Vinton and Hawk. His eyebrows were lifted questioningly.

"My name's Gulliver."

Vinton broke in. "We caught him blowin' up the bridge."

"That's a downright lie an' I'll ram it down yo' gullet!" Gulliver roared. "I was on my way here to see yo'." He looked at Daniels. "I got across that there bridge

an' then she blew sky high. I was blame near blown up with it."

Daniels scratched his chin. "Gulliver," he said. "That name's familiar. Where have I heard of you?"

"I don't know the answer to that, but I'll tell yo' why I came here!"

"You came because we brought you," said Vinton.

Gulliver turned and eyed the stocky man disdainfully. "That," he said slowly, "is what *yo'* think! I came because I wanted to ask Daniels what he an' the syndicate aim to do to Halfpint Hoolihan an' Ponderosa Pete."

Daniels snapped his fingers sharply. "I've got it! I know where I heard the name of Gulliver."

"Where, boss?" asked Vinton.

"He sent a telegram to Hoolihan. Said he was coming to California."

"Did Hoolihan tell yo' that?" Gulliver demanded.

Daniels grinned and shook his head. "I'm not telling the source of my information." To Vinton, he said, "So this gent blew up the bridge?"

"That's right," Vinton lied.

"Yeah," agreed Hawk.

"Yo're two lyin' polecats!" Gulliver turned to Daniels. "Yo' needn't believe that hogwash!"

"But I do believe it," replied Daniels. "I know both these men well. They've been in my employ for a long time. I'm sure they wouldn't tell me anything that's not true."

"Of all the—"

Daniels ignored the interruption. "You men," he said to Vinton and Hawk, "take Gulliver to the stone house. That," he explained to Gulliver, "is a sort of jail. Once in a while we catch a man stealing or trying to kill someone. We hold him in the stone house until it's convenient to take him to the regular jail in Pine."

"Yo' mean to sit there an' tell me yo' aim to jail me?" Gulliver demanded incredulously.

"Of course we mean to jail you. The destruction of the bridge is a serious matter. Perhaps you don't realize what it means. Well, I'll tell you. It means none of the men who work here can cross over to the timber on the south side of the Snake River. It means that if a fire happened to break out in Pete's timber, none of us could help Pete fight it."

Daniels turned to Vinton and Hawk. "Take this man to the stone house, and if he makes any attempt to escape, shoot him."

"Right, boss."

"Do you fully understand what I said? If he attempts to escape, you are to shoot!"

Gulliver grasped the significance of the instructions. Daniels, he knew, had given the order to commit murder. The explanation to the law would be that the man who had wantonly blown up the bridge had been shot while trying to escape.

Daniels took a pair of handcuffs from a desk drawer. "You'd better—" he began. A clanging cut him off.

It was the sound of a huge triangle being pounded with a sledgehammer. And through the open window, along with the clanging, came the shouts of men. One word seemed to dominate the cries:

"Fire!"

The door flew open and a man rushed in, yelling, "Pete's timber is on fire!"

For a split second Gulliver was forgotten. Daniels, Vinton, and Hawk turned as one man toward the door. In that split second, Gulliver went into action!

Vinton had been standing directly behind the big man. Gulliver drove his foot back against Vinton's knees to deliver a kick that a strong mule would have boasted about. The Number One aide had time for only a single cry of surprise and pain before he hit the floor.

Gulliver's pent-up rage exploded. "My turn!" he bellowed as he swung his huge right arm in a wide sweep. Hawk was about to fire when he saw that massive arm and particularly the hamlike fist rushing toward his face. He couldn't dodge. He couldn't move! Every muscle seemed to have been frozen by terror.

Splat!

Gulliver was gratified by the sound of his fist on Hawk's nose.

Ron Daniels reached into the middle drawer for a gun. He had a fleeting glimpse of Gulliver's huge boot against the front edge of the desk. After that, he hardly knew what happened. The desk leaped. The edge

rammed Daniels in the stomach. Daniels' chair rolled back on oiled castors as far as the wall and stopped suddenly, causing Daniels' head to snap backward against the wall.

Vinton, lying on the floor, reached with one hand to pick up the gun he had dropped. He didn't see Gulliver leap, but suddenly the heel of a boot came from somewhere above and landed crushingly on his outstretched fingers.

The man who had opened the door to announce the fire recovered from his surprise and decided to aid his co-workers. Gripping a club in one hand, he started across the room toward Gulliver.

Gulliver, with speed that was amazing in so big a man, reached down, gripped Vinton by the collar and the belt and threw him like a rag doll at the oncoming lumberman. The thud of colliding bodies was followed by the clatter of two men falling to the floor.

Gulliver saw his gun in Hawk's belt. He jerked it out, then rushed to the door. He paused there, to glance at the room. Hawk lay unconscious with blood running from his broken nose. Daniels, white-faced and barely conscious, was trying to squirm out of the wreckage of his chair which was jammed in a narrow space between the desk and the wall. Vinton lay on the floor, hugging his broken fingers and moaning in pain. Beside him, the fourth man lay motionless, either unconscious or pretending to be.

Gulliver left the office and closed the door.

Above the clanging fire alarm, he heard the shouts of running men. "Spread the word! Pete's timber is on fire!"

"Get swabs an' bring the saws an' axes!"

"Someone get the men from Number Two camp!"

And there were other shouts.

Gulliver realized that these men were leaving their work, dropping everything to go and fight a forest fire in Pete's timber. Then, with the impact of a thunderbolt, the reason for wrecking the bridge became apparent. These men, willing and eager to rush to Pete's aid, were cut off by the Snake River.

"Great day in the mornin'!" exclaimed Gulliver as another truth struck home. "So'm I!"

CHAPTER 12

A Desperate Battle

"Wake up, Whiz!" There was urgency in Tom Quest's voice as he gripped the newshound by the shoulder. "Wake up!"

Whiz Walton opened his eyes. "What's up?" he murmured sleepily.

"I don't know," replied Tom. "Get up and get dressed so we can find out."

The columnist sat up and rubbed his eyes. He looked out the window at the eastern horizon, then at Tom. "Before sunrise," he grumbled. Then, more nearly wide awake, "You're dressed."

"I got up a few minutes ago and noticed that Gulliver's bunk was empty, so I pulled on some clothes and went looking for him."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, Whiz. The Chinese cook said he saw them leaving the house at daybreak. They walked north along the road."

"You say they were walking?" Whiz was pulling on his clothes. "Who's they?"

"Gulliver and Ponderosa Pete."

"If Gulliver wanted to go somewhere, why didn't he call us?"

"I don't know."

"The jeep still here?"

"Yes. I thought we might drive along the road and look for Gulliver and Pete."

"I'll be ready in five minutes."

A few minutes later, the motor of the jeep roared into life. Tom drove slowly while he and Whiz Walton watched the dense forest on both sides of the twisting road for some sign of Gulliver and Pete. Presently they were startled by the sudden blast of a heavy gun.

Tom jammed on the brakes.

The twittering of frightened birds could be heard above the idling rumble of the car's engine, but nothing more.

Tom grinned. "I know what that was," he said, pointing to a length of broken cord beside the road. "Another of Pete's shotgun alarms."

"Might as well be shot as scared to death," Whiz complained. "I thought someone was blazing away at us."

Tom lifted his nose a trifle and sniffed the air.

"That shot," said Whiz, "should bring Pete and Gulliver if they're anywhere near."

"Whiz," said Tom suddenly. "Do you smell anything?"

The columnist sniffed. "Pine woods," he replied.

"Something like wood burning?"

Whiz took a deeper breath. "Yes," he said. "I do!"

At that moment three gunshots, close together, sounded from the forest west of the road.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "That's no shotgun signal!"

"It's a revolver," replied Tom. "A big one!"

"Who's shooting at whom?"

"Three shots is a signal of distress!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Again the three shots were spaced close together.

"That's a sure sign of trouble!"

"The smell of wood smoke is lots stronger now, Tom. Do you suppose—"

"Get out!" cut in Tom, shutting off the engine. "We'll try to find out where those shots came from."

After leaving Gulliver, Ponderosa Pete had followed the horses' tracks into the forest. There, on the springy carpet of moldy ground and pine needles, it was more difficult to see the imprint of hoofs. Pete, though a fair woodsman, made slow progress on the trail. He heard the explosions that destroyed the bridge and wondered what they meant. For a moment, he was undecided

whether to investigate, or to continue on the horsemen's trail. He continued following the trail.

A short time later, he saw a barely perceptible wisp of smoke filtering upward from a tiny hummock of damp earth. Smoke meant fire, and fire meant disaster! Pete dropped to his knees, pawed aside the earth, and uncovered a length of lighted fuse.

With a muttered oath, he whipped out a jackknife, opened the blade, and cut off the fuse several inches from the lighted end. He dropped the lighted section on a patch of green moss. While it burned out harmlessly, he uncovered the remainder of the fuse. It terminated in a carefully concealed tomato can filled to the brim with gasoline! And the ground around the can had been saturated with the highly inflammable fluid. It was a cunningly planned device to start a forest fire when the spark from the fuse reached the gasoline.

"Daniels' work!" exclaimed the lumberman. "The schemin' polecat wants my timber to burn!" He swore vividly. "Those men on horseback did this," he decided. "I'll find 'em if it's the last thing I do!"

As he started forward on the trail of the horsemen he wondered if other cans of gasoline had been planted with burning fuse attached. With a feeling of despair, he realized that this was a strong probability. Five minutes later, it became a certainty when his nostrils were assailed by the pungent odor of burning pine.

And then he saw smoke in the forest on his left. While he ran in that direction he heard a distant shot-

gun blast. It meant that someone was on the road, but Ponderosa Pete was too concerned to think about that.

He saw flames in the forest. Flames that crackled and roared as they licked upward from the ground to high above the tops of burning trees.

"My timber!" cried Pete chokingly. He drew his gun and fired three times into the air. "I hope to Heaven some of the guards hear the signal an' come fast!" He fired three more shots.

Alone and with no equipment to combat the fire, there was nothing Pete could do. He bypassed the burning area and continued running toward the road. "If I can only get some men an' some tools," he panted, "before it's too late."

"Pete!" It was Tom Quest who shouted. He and Whiz Walton were approaching on the run.

"Fire!" gasped Pete, pointing over his shoulder. "It'll spread fast!"

"Tell us what to do," replied Tom.

"Need men. Lots of them."

"Where's Gulliver?"

"He went to see Daniels."

"The jeep's on the road near by. I'll go and get him."

"Daniels is a crook, but most of the lumberjacks workin' for him are straightshooters. They'll help fight the fire."

"I'll get them." Tom ran in the direction of the jeep.

"What shall I do?" asked Whiz.

"Come with me!" replied Pete. "We'll get some tools an' try to find the guards."

Pete and Whiz ran but a few steps when they heard shouts and saw several of the guards racing toward the fire with broad-axes and saws. They were followed by two other guards who led a pair of pack mules heavily loaded with fire-fighting equipment.

A guard yelled, "Hi, boss! A lookout saw smoke an' gave us the word."

"Where's the rest of the men?"

"On the way."

Ponderosa Pete grabbed one of the axes. "Cut the trees that're downwind of the flames," he cried. Then to Whiz, "You help with one of the saws."

The trained men knew what to do without further direction. Pete and several others cut deep notches in selected trees, then other men with huge saws completed the felling. Their eyes were red, their throats were raw from the clouds of smoke blowing ahead of the advancing fire. Sweat streamed from the faces of the men struggling with speed born of desperation to drop enough trees to slow the fire's progress until help came from the north side of the Snake River. No one doubted that help would be forthcoming, because it was a code of the timber country that fire fighting took priority over any other activity.

Whiz Walton's arms and shoulders ached from his effort to keep pace with the strong man at the other end of the two-man saw. His throat was parched and

his eyes smarted frightfully, but he stuck gamely to the task until his partner shouted, "There she goes! Stand clear!"

The big tree toppled.

"Move to the next one," shouted Pete.

The columnist gasped, "We need more men."

"They'll be here," replied Pete confidently. "Even if Tom didn't go for them, they'd see the smoke from their camp an' come on the run. We gotta slow the fire as much as we can until they get here."

And then, in another part of the forest, a second fire broke out!

CHAPTER 13

Tom Plunges In

When Gulliver reached the bank of the river, he saw more than a score of men standing near the place where the bridge had been and more arriving all the time. Above the trees in Pete's forest, two columns of smoke rose from separate fires.

The men from the camp included all classes of lumber camp society, lowly swampers, four- and two-up drivers, flatheads, scalers, skidway men, and sawers as well as the few professional fire fighters who were always kept on duty. The men had saws and axes, swabs and pails, everything, in fact, with which to fight a fire.

The crowd increased to more than half a hundred. Some of those hard, tough men had frank tears in their eyes as they stood helpless while fine timber was being consumed by flames. It was not a silent crowd. Everyone seemed to be shouting. Some cursed the river that

blocked them; others cried out imprecations at the fire; at the bridge that had disappeared; at their fellow men and at everything in general.

Few of the men could swim at all and none could swim well enough to cross that rushing torrent of water. But Gulliver was determined to try. He tied a rope around his waist and handed the other end to a near-by lumberman.

"If I git across with the rope," he said, "we'll git 'er tied on both sides, an' yo' can all pull yo'selves across by it."

"That's the best idea so far," someone shouted. "Go on, mister! Swim across!"

Gulliver dived in clumsily. Striking the water with a splash, he sank below the surface. He came up about twenty feet downstream, then struck out in a breast-stroke. In a moment, he had been carried with the current as far as the rope would permit, but had made no progress toward the opposite bank. He finally gave up the struggle and shouted in a voice of disgust, "Haul me in."

Tom Quest reached the river soon after Gulliver had been pulled to dry ground. He stopped the jeep and leaped out. "Gulliver!" he shouted above the roar of the water. "Where's the bridge?"

"Blown up!" bellowed the big man on the opposite shore. "We're cut off from that there fire!"

"Could you and the others cross if you had a rope to hang on to?"

"Can't git a rope across. It's too far to throw."

Tom reached into the jeep and brought up a lariat that lay with other duffle on the floor. He held it up for Gulliver and the others to see. "I'll tie one end to the jeep," he shouted, "and bring the other end to you."

"Hold on, Tom!" replied Gulliver. "Yo' can't swim across that river. I tried it an' didn't git nowhere."

Tom grinned inwardly. He knew that despite Gulliver's great strength, the big man was a very weak swimmer. Tom, on the other hand, had been trained in school. He was an expert swimmer and had won prizes on the school's swimming team.

"I'll try it anyway," he shouted as he pulled off his shoes. He stripped to his underwear, then tied one end of the rope to a wheel of the jeep and the other end around his slim waist.

He left the bank with a shallow racing dive, entering the water cleanly, and struck out with a powerful crawl stroke.

At first he was carried a few yards downstream, but by changing his course to head obliquely upstream, he managed to maintain his position relative to the shore while at the same time making headway toward the opposite bank.

His strong legs beat the foaming water steadily in rhythm to his overarm stroke. Most of his energy went into the fight against the current. Progress toward the north bank was painfully slow.

Gulliver and the others on the bank were silent as they watched the valiant battle against the Snake River.

In midstream, Tom was unexpectedly sucked down by an undertow. He lost considerable ground before he reached the surface. Inch by inch he fought his way upstream and toward the bank.

His legs were tiring and his arms felt heavy. He wondered if his strength would hold out. Past midstream, the force of the river diminished and Tom made faster progress.

He heard shouts of encouragement, with Gulliver's voice booming above the others. Then the cries changed to cheers when it became apparent that the fight was won.

The last few yards were easy. A dozen hands reached out to help Tom ashore. Gulliver pushed aside the others and lifted his young friend out of the water.

He untied the rope from Tom's waist. "Hitch this around that there stake where the bridge was," he ordered. "Pull 'er tight, then git across that water to the fire."

The lumbermen didn't need to be told. They were already tying their tools to their belts. As soon as the rope was taut they entered the water and pulled themselves, hand over hand, along the rope to the south shore.

CHAPTER 14

Reinforcements

WHIZ WALTON'S senses were numb. He no longer felt the pain of burns on his face and hands. He moved mechanically, working at his end of a saw. Pete and the others were in the same condition. They worked with saws and axes because there was nothing else to do. They kept going far beyond the limits of human endurance. They didn't realize that the fire was closing in on them; that they would soon be trapped with no way to escape.

Great trees were falling on all sides, sending up great showers of sparks. Enormous clouds of varicolored smoke swirled around the men, choking and strangling them.

"Fight!" gasped Pete with a choking sob. "G-got to keep fightin'!"

"Gimme an axe!"

Whiz Walton turned toward the familiar voice. "Gulliver!" he cried.

Other men, dozens of them, it seemed, were following the big man. They went into action without delay.

"There's another fire!" gasped Ponderosa Pete.

"We spotted two more," replied a lumberjack. "Some of the boys are taking care of them."

"Gulliver," said Whiz, "did you see Tom?"

"Yep!" grunted Gulliver, swinging an axe. "I sent him to the house for water."

Tom arrived in the jeep, threading his way carefully through the trees. The water was a lifesaver to the men whose throats were parched and raw.

Tom extended a cup to Ponderosa Pete.

The lumberman's face was nearly purple from exertion. His eyebrows and mustache were singed and his hands trembled. He gripped the side of the jeep for support while he drank.

"My—my timber," he said huskily.

"Don't worry, Pete," shouted one of the men. "We've got it under control!"

Pete's knees buckled and he slumped to the ground.

Tom jumped out of the jeep as Whiz Walton rushed forward.

"Better get him out of here," the columnist said. "I'll help you lift him into the car. Take him to the house."

Gulliver rushed up, carrying a two-bladed axe. "What's wrong with Pete?" he demanded.

"What do you suppose?" snapped Whiz Walton. "He's collapsed."

Tom was holding a wet cloth to the lumberman's face. "Exertion and smoke, I guess," he said. "I'll take him to the house."

Gulliver eyed Whiz Walton. "Yo', Whiz," he said, "yo' better go along. Yo' look about ready to drop alongside o' Pete."

"I—I *am* a little bushed," confessed the newshound.

"Yo' go to the house. The rest of us can handle things here."

CHAPTER 15

Afterglow

It was evening when Tom Quest heard a soft moan. He left his chair beside a reading lamp and crossed the room to the side of Ponderosa Pete's bed.

"Fire," mumbled the lumberman. "We—we g-gotta fight the fire."

"Take it easy, Pete. The fire is out and everything will be all right."

Pete opened his eyes. "Tom," he murmured.

"You're in your own bed, Pete. You've been unconscious ever since you collapsed during the fire."

Pete looked toward the window. "It—it's dark outside."

"It's about nine o'clock in the evening." Tom poured a glass of water from a pitcher on the bedside table. "I've a lot to tell you." He lifted Pete's head and held the tumbler to his lips.

The drink of water seemed to restore full consciousness. Pete's eyes became clearer and the color returned to his pallid face. He spoke in a stronger voice. "The fire!" He tried to sit up. "Gotta fight the fire!"

"Steady," said Tom. "Lie back and relax. I told you the fire is out."

"Out?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes, and men are on the watch to prevent another fire from any sparks that might have lingered."

"My—my timber! Is it all gone?"

"No. Cruisers estimate you've lost less than one per cent of your timber."

Pete sighed. "That's good news."

"You lost consciousness from smoke and exhaustion. The doctor has been here and looked you over. He said you'll be as good as new in a couple of days."

"What doctor?"

"The one from Daniels' camp."

Pete's face clouded with anger. "Daniels! That schemin' polecat! He's to blame for that fire. I'll bet everything on it. I saw—"

"Just a minute, Pete. There's no reason to get excited. Just wait until you hear what I have to tell you."

"There's a lot I want to know. What happened after I passed out?"

"A lot happened before you passed out. To begin

with, it's true that Daniels started the fire. He sent two men across the river with gasoline and fuse."

"I found a place where they'd lighted a fuse to a can of gasoline."

Tom nodded. "They did that in several places."

Pete's hands were clenched. "If I can get my hands on those critters—" he began. "D'you know their names?"

"Lefty Lennex and Gimp Gordon. They've paid for what they did."

"Paid? How?"

"With their lives."

"You mean they're dead?"

"Yes. Their bodies were found in a burned area."

"Were they trapped by the fire?"

"Gulliver and Whiz Walton think they spilled gasoline on the ground. It vaporized, then exploded when they struck a match to light a fuse."

Ponderosa Pete was silent for a moment. "Anyone else dead?" he asked.

"No. A few of the men have burns, but there are no serious injuries."

"I remember," Pete said, "that a lot of the men from Daniels' camp came to help fight the fire. That's about the last thing I can remember."

"After they arrived, Whiz Walton and I brought you here in the jeep. When the fires were all out, Gulliver came with the doctor who had accompanied the men

from the lumber camp. While the doctor looked you over, Gulliver told about finding Gimp and Lefty. He said the lumbermen were mighty angry when they realized the fires had been set purposely."

"How'd they know Gimp and Lefty started the fires?"

"There was plenty of evidence. An empty gasoline can was found near their bodies. Later, their horses were found. They still had two cans full of gasoline and some dynamite fuse tied on their backs."

"Horses from Daniels' camp?"

"Yes."

"Did they escape the fire?"

Tom nodded. "They weren't hurt," he said.

"Then what happened?"

"Well, after Gulliver knew you weren't seriously hurt, he asked me to stay here with you. He and Whiz left in the jeep to help the lumbermen build a temporary bridge across the Snake River."

"Why're they buildin' a temporary bridge?"

"The regular bridge was destroyed. It was blown up."

"Blown up!" exclaimed the invalid. "Sakes alive! Now I remember. Those explosions! I sure missed plenty. Tell me about that."

Tom related as much as Gulliver had told him of the destruction of the bridge and the fight in Daniels' office. "Apparently," the boy finished, "the bridge was destroyed so the lumbermen couldn't cross the river to fight the fires in your timber."

Pete's face grew livid and his voice trembled with rage. "Of all the downright rotten schemes!" Then he looked up suddenly. "How *did* those men cross the river? Those fellers couldn't swim across."

"I tied one end of a rope to the jeep, then swam across the river with the other end. We tied it to a stake and the men pulled themselves across."

"You swam across the Snake River?"

"It wasn't much," replied Tom modestly.

"Not much! Why, doggone it, Tom, I don't know of a man alive who could swim across that stretch of rushin' water at this time of the year."

"I know a lot of men who could," grinned Tom. "I think any of the fellows on our school swimming team could have done it."

"No one around here could do it."

"The men around here have never been interested in swimming."

"If you hadn't made that swim, those fellers couldn't have crossed."

Tom made no comment.

"What's more," Pete's voice rose to a higher pitch as he realized the full importance of Tom's feat. "If those men hadn't crossed, I'd have lost every tree on my property! Everything that's left, I owe to you!"

"Don't make so much of it," laughed Tom.

"I aim to make plenty of it!"

"You'd better let me finish what I have to tell you."

"Is there more?"

"Yes. As soon as the lumbermen finish a bridge and get across the river, they're going to call on Ron Daniels in a body."

"For what?"

"To make him tell the truth about the plan to burn your timber."

"They won't get nowhere with Daniels. That slick-tongued polecat will tell a string of fancy lies. They'll never get him to admit anything."

"I think he'll be *persuaded* to talk," Tom replied.

"What makes you think so?"

"Gulliver and Whiz are going with the lumbermen. Whiz has a knack of asking questions and Gulliver has a way of getting honest answers."

At that moment the roar of the approaching jeep came through the open window.

Tom leaped to his feet. "I think they're back," he said.

The jeep's engine stopped and Gulliver's big voice boomed. "Yo', Tom! We're back!"

Tom met his friends in the living room as Wong came from the kitchen.

Whiz Walton looked tired but satisfied, and Gulliver wore a wide grin. "How's Pete?" the big man asked.

Pete answered for himself. "I'm all right," he called from the bedroom. "Come in here an' tell me the latest."

"Hungry?" asked Wong.

"Yo' c'n say that again, Wong. Rustle up plenty o' grub an' yell when it's ready."

In the bedroom Gulliver shook hands with Pete. "Wait 'til yo' hear what we did."

"I'm waitin'."

Tom said, "I told him as much as I knew. Did the men get a bridge built?"

Gulliver nodded.

"You should have seen them work!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "They cut and trimmed trees and hauled them to the river. Then they used ropes to stand the logs on end and dropped them across the river. In no time at all they had smaller logs tied in place to make a bridge that we crossed in the jeep."

"An' then," put in Gulliver, "the fun began."

"Did you see Daniels?"

"Sure we saw him. The lumbermen, an' Whiz an' I, we corralled Daniels an' that assistant of his."

"Zack Vinton?"

"Yep. At first Daniels denied knowin' anythin' about a plot to burn down the trees, an' so did Vinton. But Vinton soon broke down an' started tellin' true facts."

"He said Daniels gave him the orders," said Whiz Walton. "He confessed to blowing up the bridge and sending Gimp and Lefty to start the forest fires. He named the man who helped him blow up the bridge."

"A critter called 'Hawk,' " said Gulliver. "He ran out. No one's been able to find him."

"But that doesn't matter," said Whiz. "We have a clean-cut case against Daniels and Vinton."

"Where are they now?" asked Pete.

"We took them to Pine and turned them over to the sheriff. He locked them up in the jail."

"There's just one thing they wouldn't talk about," said Gulliver.

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"The syndicate. Neither one of them'll admit knowin' anything about a lumber syndicate. But maybe when I see 'em in the mornin', I can do a little more persuadin' an' find out who's behind Daniels."

"Are we all going to Pine in the morning?" asked Tom.

Gulliver said, "I reckon it'd be better if I went there alone. I want to do some lookin' around an' talk to a few men. Then I'll come back here an' git yo' an' Whiz before I go to call on Halfpint Hoolihan."

CHAPTER 16

Death Meal

THE JAIL in Pine consisted of a small room adjoining the office of the sheriff. It was an eight-by-ten room that held two cots, two chairs, and a battered washstand. The jail was generally used to hold men whose drinking had made them overly boisterous or quarrelsome. Sheriff Lawson treated these individuals with kindness and consideration. Many a lumberman from the surrounding hills and a number of the townsmen had wakened in Lawson's little jail. Lawson was always on hand with plenty of black coffee, followed by a substantial breakfast. He provided facilities for washing and tools for shaving, then turned the jail's occupant loose to go home or to work.

But now, with Daniels and Vinton locked in the cell, the sheriff's position had become important. He

sat in his office with a gun strapped to his hips and watched the clock. It was five minutes to nine.

"That big gent should be here in a few minutes," he said to Deputy Haslip.

"Who?"

"Gulliver. He's one of the men who brought Daniels and Vinton here last night."

"Oh, yes. I remember him."

"Who," grinned the sheriff, "could forget him?"

"Why is he comin' this morning?"

"If Ponderosa Pete is able to travel, Gulliver will bring him to sign the bill of complaint against the prisoners."

"What if Pete can't come?"

"Gulliver said he'd be here anyway. He wants to talk some more to Daniels an' Vinton."

"Why does he want to talk to 'em?" asked the deputy.

Sheriff Lawson looked around to make sure he and the deputy were alone in the office, then spoke in a low voice. "I understand there's some crooked business goin' on in the pine forests. It seems that some sort of organization has been ridin' roughshod over the owners of small stands of timber."

Deputy Haslip said, "Y'know, Halfpint Hoolihan told me something like that. I thought he was talkin' through his hat."

"The Hoolihan spoke to me, too, but I didn't pay

much attention to him. Now—" The sheriff broke off significantly.

The deputy's eyes widened. "D'you think there *is* a plot to get a monopoly in the timber business?"

"After what Gulliver told me," replied the lawman, "I don't know what to think."

The door of the office flew open. "Yo', Sheriff!" called Gulliver. "Top o' the mornin'!" He slammed the door.

The sheriff and deputy shook hands with the big man. "Did you bring Pete with you?" Lawson asked.

"Nope. He's still a little weak in the knees when he tries to stand up, so I figured he'd better stay home an' take it easy. How're the prisoners?"

"Meek as lambs an' quiet as kittens on a thick rug. There hasn't been a peep out of them since I took their breakfast to them."

"Then they haven't volunteered to do any more talkin'?"

"Nope."

"Did yo' question them?"

"Yes. Last evenin', after you left here, I asked them was there a top man who gave Daniels instructions. Daniels said there wasn't any such person. Vinton said the same."

"Ponderosa Pete an' the Hoolihan say otherwise, an' I believe them a lot more'n I believe what Daniels an' Vinton say." Gulliver paused, then went on, "If I

could be in that there cell with the prisoners for about half an hour, without anyone interferin', I reckon I could git the information I want."

The deputy eyed the big man's clenched fists and muttered, "I'd bet a month's pay on that."

Sheriff Lawson grinned. "I know what you mean, Gulliver. But I can't let you do it."

"Is there anythin' wrong in just askin' a few questions?" demanded Gulliver innocently.

"No, but you might get a little rough in persuadin' the prisoners to give the right answers. Those men are in my charge and I'm responsible for them. It would be bad for me if something happened to them—like you or a lynch mob."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Gulliver in an exasperated voice. "I've got to git facts! I've got to talk to those men!"

"You can *talk* to them, an' that's all. I'll let you go into the cell, but the deputy and I will go with you."

"All right," the big man replied grudgingly. "Let's go."

Sheriff Lawson rose from his chair. Followed by Gulliver and Deputy Haslip, he led the way along a corridor at the end of which a door of steel bars opened into the cell.

The prisoners seemed to be asleep on their bunks.

"Wake up," called the sheriff as he unlocked the door. "We want to talk to you."

Daniels and Vinton remained motionless.

Gulliver noticed a peculiar pallor on their faces. "They ailin'?" he demanded.

"Not that I know of. Why?"

Gulliver's voice boomed. "Wake up, yo' mangy polecats!" When neither prisoner stirred, he said, "They're sleepin' mighty sound."

Two strides carried the sheriff across the cell to the side of Daniels' bunk. He gripped the prisoner's shoulder. "Wake up, Daniels," he said.

Meanwhile Gulliver had gone to the other prisoner's side. His fingers were resting on Zack Vinton's left wrist. "By gobs!" he exclaimed. "This critter's got no pulse!"

"No pulse!" exclaimed Sheriff Lawson.

"Lemme have a look at Daniels!"

"His—his face is cold," faltered the sheriff.

Gulliver took a small mirror off the wall and held it close to the mouth and nostrils of Vinton, then Daniels. There was no clouding of the mirror's face. "D'yo' know," said Gulliver slowly, "what that means?"

"It is a test for death," said the sheriff softly.

"That's what it is."

"D-do you think—these men are dead?"

"I'd say there ain't no question about it. Yo' better call in the coroner."

"I'll go and get him," said the deputy, starting toward the door.

"Just a minute, Haslip," the sheriff said.

Haslip halted.

"Before we let the news get out of this room, let's try an' figure out how it happened. There just isn't a way that anyone could have used to kill these two! No way at all."

"How long ago did yo' see 'em alive?" asked Gulliver.

Lawson looked at his watch. "It's a little after nine right now. I saw 'em about two hours ago. That's when I opened the door and shoved their breakfast in to them. You can see the tray right there on the end of that cot."

Gulliver glanced at a large metal tray upon which thick white dishes were stacked.

"You can see they must've been all right then," the sheriff continued. "They ate the grub I brought them, and there was a sizable amount of it. Ham and eggs, three eggs apiece, fried sunny side up, and a heaping bowl of cornmeal mush, a pot of coffee, and a pitcher of cream. There was a stack of bread, too. Buttered bread. I've got a name for feeding my prisoners well."

Gulliver had returned to Ron Daniels' lifeless form. He made a careful examination for marks of violence, but found none. "Were yo'," he asked, "in the office all the time?"

"I haven't left the office since I brought in the food. The deputy an' you are the only ones who've come through the door. No one's been near the cell."

Gulliver glanced at the single window, a high, small square in which heavy iron bars were set.

"No one could get through that window," the sheriff said, noticing the big man's glance, "even if the bars weren't there. It's too small."

Gulliver moved to the tray of dishes. He sniffed the small amount of coffee that remained in the bottom of one of the cups, then held the cup close to the sheriff's nose.

"Smell this."

The lawman inhaled cautiously. "Coffee."

"Try again. See if yo' don't git a whiff o' somethin' else."

The lawman inhaled a second time, then shook his head.

"Well, I do," replied the big man. "There's a faint smell like almonds."

"Nuts?" asked the deputy.

"Not in this case," Gulliver replied. "There's a deadly poison that smells just like almonds, an' I'm bettin' it was put into the coffee."

"Poison!" the sheriff exclaimed.

Gulliver nodded. "Did yo' fix the breakfast grub?"

"No! I never fix the prisoners' food. I get it from the restaurant across the road. Mrs. Basset keeps an account of what I get and the county pays her for it. But she wouldn't put poison into the food. She'd have no reason to poison it."

"Someone else might have had a reason."

"Who?"

"That's somethin' we got to find out. Looks like

someone killed these two so's they couldn't tell anythin'!"

"But who in blazes could have done it?"

"We'll ask who was in the restaurant this mornin'," Gulliver said.

"That won't tell us anything."

"Why not?"

"Doggone near everyone in Pine goes to Mrs. Basset's place for breakfast. She opens up at about six o'clock in the morning, and from then on the restaurant's packed with customers. I was there myself this morning, and so was the deputy."

Haslip nodded without comment.

"The coroner was there, the judge, Lawyer Smythe, and about twenty-five others," the sheriff continued.

"All of 'em were there when this tray o' food was bein' fixed?" Gulliver asked.

"I reckon so."

"Then any one o' them could've dropped poison in the coffee."

"Yes."

Gulliver stacked the dishes carefully and covered them with a sheet pulled from one of the cots. "We'll find someone who can examine this stuff an' tell us what kind o' poison was used."

"Doc McAnders can do that, Gulliver," the sheriff said. "We'll get him started on it right away."

"This," said Gulliver, "ought to convince yo' that the things I said last night are true."

"About someone giving orders to Daniels?"

Gulliver nodded soberly. "What's more, Sheriff, there's someone right here in town—someone who was in that there restaurant this mornin'—workin' for the head man!"

"I've never run into a situation like it," said the sheriff. "I don't know just what to do about it."

"Might be a good idea to say nothin' about these men bein' dead or the food bein' poisoned," Gulliver suggested.

"I'll have to tell the doctor an' the coroner."

"Sure. But no one else."

Lawson turned to the deputy. "You hear that, Haslip? Keep this under your hat."

"I sure will," Haslip replied in an awed voice.

A new voice shrilled in the office at the opposite end of the corridor. It was a high-pitched voice, rich in the brogue of Ireland. "Where at is the spalpeen wearin' the badge o' law an' order?"

Gulliver responded with a full-throated exclamation that bounded off the stone walls and assailed the lawmen's eardrums. "He's here!" he bellowed. Then he shouted, "Yo', Halfpint Hoolihan!"

CHAPTER 17

Halfpint's Disappointment

THE REUNION of Gulliver and his little Irish friend was something to behold. Hoolihan was gripped beneath the armpits and tossed into the air like a baby, then embraced in a bearlike hug that made the sheriff and deputy, who were merely watching, wince.

Hoolihan, though barely over five feet in height, was a rugged individual and seemed to feel no pain from the embrace. His wizened, freckle-covered face was alight with a wide grin. His fists, small, but hard as pine knots, pummeled Gulliver while his high voice spilled a jumble of English, Mexican, and Gaelic words and expressions no one could hope to understand.

"Sure an' you're the last one I expected to see," said Hoolihan after his excitement had subsided.

"Why didn't yo' expect to see me, yo' undergrowed little blister? I told yo' I was comin'!"

"Ah, but that was days ago. I waited in the fervent hope of seein' you, but as the time went on, me hopes grew dim, an' I says to meself, I says, 'Hoolihan, the Big One's been waylaid by the bandits. The Big One's a victim of foul play.' That's what I figured, Gulliver. I was sure they'd got you."

"If they'd o' tried to git me anywhere this side o' San Francisco," replied Gulliver, "yo'd o' heard the ruckus."

The sheriff broke in. "Why did you come to see me, Hoolihan?"

"I'm bein' robbed! That crooked, snivelin' lawyer is doin' me for all I'm worth!"

"Who d'you mean?"

"Jonathan Smythe!"

"Are you speaking of me?" called a voice from the doorway.

The man who entered was of medium height and slim proportions. He appeared to be somewhere between forty-five and fifty years old. Thin, mouse-colored hair was brushed straight back from his sloping forehead, and deep lines grooved his face, running from the corners of his long, thin nose to the edges of his lipless mouth.

"You bet I'm speakin' o' you!" piped Hoolihan.

To Sheriff Lawson, Smythe said, "I saw Hoolihan come in here and thought he might try to make unjust accusations, so I thought it advisable to be on hand."

The lawyer turned to Hoolihan. "You have a misunderstanding of law."

"Misunderstandin', me eye!" snapped the small man. "Sheriff, you listen to me. You know where my land is?"

The sheriff nodded.

Hoolihan looked at Gulliver. "I own the land from the top of Bear Mountain all the way down the east slope to Dipper Creek, which same is at the foot o' the hill. An' that land is as green as the hills o' Killarney with pine timber."

"What's this lawyer tryin' to do, Halfpint?" Gulliver asked.

"He came to me an' said he had a customer who wanted to buy me timberland. He told me the price bein' offered, an' it was a mighty fair price. It was more'n the timber was worth. I hadn't thought o' sellin' up to then, but when I heard what I could get, I thought it over an' decided to sell."

"And that," put in Smythe, "is all there is to it."

"Like fun it is!" Hoolihan drew a legal document from his pocket, unfolded it, and handed it over to Gulliver.

"Here's the way Smythe drew up the deal on me land. He said that his client didn't have the cash to pay for it all at once. He paid me ten per cent down to bind the deal, an' there was a contract signed. He agreed to pay the balance in six months' time."

"I'll leave it to the sheriff to decide whether or not

there is anything wrong with a deal like t
lawyer.

"It's common enough," Lawson comme

Gulliver made no comment.

From an inner pocket, the lawyer drew a
bound in blue paper. "It just happens," he sai
I have a copy of that agreement with me. You're
come to examine it, Sheriff."

The lawman glanced at the paper and noted the date of the agreement. "The deal was made a month ago," he said. "What's happened that put you in such a stew all of a sudden, Halfpint?"

"Sure an' you should see what's goin' on! There's a whole lumber camp up there on the mountainside! I never in all me life saw so much machinery an' so many men workin' at one place!"

"What did you expect to find?" demanded Smythe. "A cattle ranch? You knew that the land was bought for the timber! Why should you be so surprised to find that men are cutting the timber?"

"Sheriff," Hoolihan went on, ignoring the lawyer, "they've built a flume right down the hill to the creek. They've already cleared off the trees at the bottom o' the hill next to the creek, an' they're workin' up!"

"It says here," Lawson tapped the document in his hand, "that the buyer can take timber from the land as soon as the deal is closed and the earnest money paid over. You got your earnest money when you got the ten per cent down payment."

ıoney! Don't that mean the balance that's

ˌlied the sheriff.

ːd to me!" shrilled Hoolihan, shaking his fist
ɹe. "I asked you about 'earnest money,' an' you
ɹe it means the balance that is due."

"How," smiled Smythe blandly, "could I have told you anything like that?"

"You did!"

"I'm sure you must have misunderstood me."

Hoolihan turned to Gulliver. "He's lyin' through his teeth! Sure an' I remember what the spalpeen told me! Now he's denyin' he said any such thing!"

"Have yo'," said Gulliver, "got any more to tell?"

"Yes!" cried the little Irishman. "I went up that hill to find the boss an' register me protest, but before I had the chance to state me name, a foreman asked me if I'd like a job at top wages plus a bonus. Then he went on to say that every cord o' timber had to be cleared off the mountainside within the next five months!"

Gulliver's face was like a thundercloud. "Meanin'," he rasped, "the buyer o' that land means to clear off the timber an' not pay you any more than yo' already got."

"That's it," replied Hoolihan. "They don't intend to pay me another dime! Not a cent! They'll let me have me hill back, an' it won't be worth a thing! Won't even be good for plantin' crops on account o' all the stumps that'll be left!"

The sheriff looked at Smythe. "The deal is legal, I suppose," he muttered.

"It'll stand in any court in the land," the lawyer said confidently. "If that poor fool thinks he can get an injunction to stop the cutting of timber, he's due for a shockingly rude awakening. When I make a land deal, I make sure the deal will hold water. Especially when I buy it for myself."

"For yourself?" echoed Hoolihan. "You mean to say you're the one that owns that land?"

"As far as you're concerned, I am."

"You told me it was for someone else! You told me you were just the go-between!"

"I can't remember everything I say. If men could remember all verbal agreements and understandings accurately there would be no need for written agreements. All I know," Smythe finished, "is what it says in the agreement."

"Sheriff," pleaded Hoolihan, "he can't swindle me like this, can he?"

Lawson looked at Gulliver. "What do you think?"

"The chances are," Gulliver said, "the paper is legal."

"Who are you?" demanded Smythe.

"He's me friend. Me bosom pal!" stated Hoolihan. "The name is Gulliver."

Smythe nodded.

"Now go on, Gulliver," continued the small Irishman. "Finish tellin' the crook."

"Tellin' him what?"

"What we're goin' to do! Tell him he's not goin' to get away with his thievin' game! Tell him we're lined up side by side an' we'll fight him to the bitter end!"

"Now take it easy, Hoolihan. He's got a legal paper, an yo' signed it. What's more, accordin' to what yo' said, he's got men on yo' place cuttin' timber."

"That he has," howled Hoolihan. "That he sure as shootin' has!"

Gulliver shrugged his massive shoulders. "That sort o' settles it."

Hoolihan's light blue eyes stared incredulously at the big man. "Y-you don't mean that," he faltered. "You don't mean you're tellin' me to let him get away with it? Tellin' me to give up without a fight?"

"Of course he's telling you to give up without a fight," said Smythe. "That's the best advice any man can give you."

"Oh, no!" The little man seemed on the verge of tears. "You ain't the Gulliver I used to know," he said accusingly. "You've changed. You've gone soft."

"Hoolihan," said Gulliver, "we got a lot to talk about. I'm goin' to take yo' back to Pete's with me."

"I'm not goin' anywhere with you! I'm goin' back to me land an' fight the enemy alone! I'll fight 'em to the death!"

"Yo'll do nothin' o' the kind. I admire yo' spunk, Halfpint, but there's times to fight an' times when there's no sense fightin'. This is one o' them times."

"But I—"

"There's two ways yo' can go back to Pete's place with me. Yo' can go agreeably, or yo' can put up a fight, in which case I'll have to tuck yo' under my arm an' take yo' strugglin'."

Hoolihan looked from Gulliver to the sheriff.

"Better go with him," Sheriff Lawson advised.

Halfpint uttered a sigh that began in his boots. "I'll go. But Gulliver, you ain't the man you used to be."

The two men left the office and boarded the jeep. Before starting the engine, Gulliver said, "Halfpint, I reckon there's somethin' yo' should git through yo' head."

"What's that?" asked Hoolihan shortly.

"I didn't come all the way from Texas to see yo' done out o' yo' timber."

"Well, you're seein' it."

"Now don't talk so frothy. We're goin' to do somethin' about it, but there's no use puttin' up a lot o' bluff an' bluster about shootin' it out against the lumbermen, lawmen, an' lawyers. We got to figure out some other way to fight that Smythe galoot."

"How?"

"I don't know. But I figure when we sit down with Tom an' Whiz Walton an' talk the thing over, we can figure out somethin'."

The jeep roared into life and headed south.

CHAPTER 18

Plan for Counterattack

DURING the two days following the deaths of Daniels and Vinton, Sheriff Lawson conducted a vigorous investigation which established the fact that the men had died from poison put into their coffee by person or persons unknown.

The flurry of excitement stirred up by the murders in the jail died down, and life in Pine resumed its placid routine.

Meanwhile, Halfpint Hoolihan and Ponderosa Pete had renewed their friendship. These two, together with Gulliver, Whiz Walton, and Tom Quest became a board of strategy that discussed various plans for combating the lawyer, Jonathan Smythe, and putting a stop to the cutting of timber.

Whiz Walton's suggestion to seek legal remedy by means of an injunction was considered at length and finally rejected. Due to the slow movement of the law in that part of the country, an injunction would, even if granted, be too late to save the timber.

There were other suggestions, all of which, for one reason or another, were discarded. No one could remember who finally sparked the idea that flowered into a fully developed plan of action.

At first, the idea was discussed laughingly, until Tom, in a serious voice, said, "What's wrong with it?"

"We could never put over a deal like that," Whiz Walton said.

"I don't see why not, Whiz. It's just a series of simple moves, each one depending on a perfectly normal reaction."

The columnist stopped grinning.

Tom went on, "Smythe doesn't know you or me, Whiz. He'd never suspect that we were working for Hoolihan."

"You mean, Tom, you and I are the ones who would go to Hoolihan's cabin and pose as a couple of hopeful tenderfeet?"

"Why not?"

"Maybe we *could* put it over." Whiz pondered for a moment. "I'll bet we could!" he said emphatically.

Hoolihan looked dubiously from Tom to Whiz. "Sure an' it's the craziest thing I ever heard of," he murmured. "What do you think, Gulliver?"

"I been kickin' the idea around in my head, Halfpint, an' the more I think of it, the better I like it. I figure it's worth a try."

Gulliver's approval was all that Hoolihan required. The worried frown that had been stamped on his thin face during the days of discussion disappeared like magic.

"The saints be praised!" he cried. "We got a plan!"

It was one week after the deaths of Vinton and Daniels when Jonathan Smythe traveled by horse from Pine to the lumber camp on Halfpint Hoolihan's mountainside timberland. He was making the trip in response to a message from Hank Brady, the manager of the camp, who felt the need of consultation and advice.

As the lawyer rode along the bank of Dipper Creek, on his way to the camp, he noted with satisfaction that much of the land at the bottom of the mountain had already been cleared of timber. He saw a mass of logs floating on the waters of the creek.

Smythe turned his horse uphill. He rode past countless stumps that marked the places where great trees had once stood. He heard the rasp of sharp saws and the chug of axes mingled with the throaty coughing of the donkey engine; the hoof clumps of mules and the shouts of men who drove the mules. Twice in the uphill ride, Smythe heard the thrilling cry of, "*Timber-r-r!*" followed by the crash of a falling tree. Three times he heard the unearthly sound of big logs shooting down

the flume and splashing into Dipper Creek. Then he reached the camp.

Brady came out of the office to meet Smythe. The lawyer dismounted stiffly and shook hands with the big, broad-shouldered lumberman.

"It looks to me," Smythe said, "as if you're doing fairly well."

"We're doing all right," replied Brady. "I could use a few more men, but I'll get by with what I have."

Smythe jabbed his thumb in the direction of the big trees. "Can you take most of those in the next five months?" he asked.

"We'll take all of them."

"Are you sure?"

Brady nodded. "We'll get 'em unless something breaks our stride. Right now, we're going along at a good clip."

"Why did you send for me?"

"I've been worried about a few things I heard."

"Get to the point. What'd you hear?" the lawyer snapped impatiently.

"There's a big lumber camp on the Snake River, isn't there?"

"Yes."

"Owned by the same outfit that's behind this outfit?"

"As far as you're concerned, Brady, *I'm* the one owner of this land."

"That's a good enough story for the public," Brady said, "but you and I both know you're nothing but a

front man. The big boss of the syndicate gave orders to the men in charge of the Snake River camp, the same as he gives orders to you. Right?"

Smythe pursed his lips and stroked his chin thoughtfully. After a pause, he said, "What of it?"

"I heard that the bosses of the Snake River camp died of poisoning."

Smythe nodded slowly. "Let's go into the office," he said. "I'm cold."

Brady opened the door and led the way into the office where two men were bent over desks. "You pencil pushers get out," the lumberman said. "I need the office for a private conference."

The men looked up curiously, nodded, then left the building.

"Now," said Smythe, when he and Brady were alone. "Why did you send for me?"

"I want to know about Daniels and Vinton."

"What about them?"

"They were murdered. Right?"

"You seem to be well informed," the lawyer observed.

"Is my information correct?"

"As far as I know, it is."

"Did the syndicate order them to be murdered?"

"How do I know?" snapped the lawyer.

"Were they killed because they knew too much? Or because they made a mistake?"

Smythe's voice had a sharp edge. "What happens to

men in other camps is no concern of yours, Brady. As far as you're concerned, you're working for me. Your job is to clear off all this timber within five months. You do that and you'll have nothing to worry about. In other words, mind your own business."

"All right. You needn't get sore about it."

"I hope you didn't ask me to ride all this way simply to discuss Ron Daniels?"

"No. I've got to go over some of the records with you. That was the main reason I asked you to come here."

"Very well. But before we go over the records, please have someone take care of my horse. I think I'll stay here overnight."

"I'd like to have you stay," said Brady dubiously, "but I don't know where we can put you. We put up only two buildings, this one and the bunkhouse. Three of the foremen sleep in here with me and the bunkhouse is crowded."

"You'll find a place for me to sleep."

"I might be able to crowd the foremen into the bunkhouse," Brady mused. "Or maybe you'd like to use Hoolihan's cabin. That's the place at the foot of the hill."

"Someone's already using it."

"That can't be. Hoolihan left nearly a week ago."

"Someone is there now," replied Smythe. "At least, there's a fire in the cabin. I saw smoke rising from the chimney."

"A fire?" Brady went to the window and looked down the hill. Smoke was coming from the chimney of Hoolihan's cabin. "That's funny," he muttered. "The place was vacant this morning. I know, because I was in it. I was just looking it over."

"I wonder if Hoolihan has come back."

Brady said, "I don't know. It might be a good idea to find out."

"He was in Pine last week," said the lawyer. "He made quite a fuss about things."

"He did?"

"One of your foremen happened to meet him and offer him a job. He told Hoolihan that this lumber had to be taken before the end of the next five months. Hoolihan got wise. He realized that we intended to clear the land, then forfeit on the land contract and not pay him the balance that's owed."

"He must've been fit to be tied."

"He was. He was wild enough to try almost anything. He might even try to shoot some of your men." Smythe rose to his feet. "We'd better see if it's Hoolihan who is in that shack."

"Good idea," Brady agreed.

All the way downhill to Halfpint Hoolihan's cabin, Smythe grumbled about his muscles made lame by the four-hour horseback ride. When he and Brady neared the place, they saw that the door was partly open. Then they saw the newcomers.

CHAPTER 19

Deal and Double-Deal

TOM QUEST and Whiz Walton came to the open door and smiled cordially as Jonathan Smythe and Brady approached the cabin.

"Welcome," said the columnist.

"Who are you?" demanded Brady, frowning.

"The name is Walton. This is my friend, Tom."

"This," said Smythe, "is private property and you are trespassing."

"We know it's private," said Tom. "We know the man who owns this cabin. His name is Hoolihan."

"He used to live here, but he's moved."

"He has?" asked Whiz with wide-eyed innocence. "Do you know where we could find him?"

"No." Smythe's reply was clipped.

"Oh, golly," Tom murmured as if greatly disappointed. He looked at Whiz. "If we can't find him, it'll be just too bad."

The columnist looked just as concerned as Tom Quest, but inwardly he was chuckling at the convincing way that Tom was acting. "Who are you?" he inquired.

"My name is Jonathan Smythe. This is Mr. Brady."

Neither man offered to shake hands.

"Why," asked Smythe, "are you so anxious to find Hoolihan?"

"I'll tell you," began Tom, but Whiz cut him off sharply.

"I don't see as it's any of your business," he replied.

"It is our business to keep trespassers off this property."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, we'll clear out," said Whiz. "How about it, Tom?"

"There's no use staying around here." Tom entered the cabin, saying, "I'll go and get our packs, then we'll shove on."

"Sorry we intruded," Whiz said.

"Here we are," said Tom, coming from the cabin with two blanket rolls. "Good thing we hadn't unpacked our gear."

Brady and the attorney watched in silence as Tom and the reporter tied their blanket rolls behind the saddles of two horses loaned by Ponderosa Pete, and rode away.

"What do you make of those two?" Brady asked.

"I don't know," replied Smythe. "They seemed to be very eager to find Hoolihan."

"Did you notice their clothes and their gear?"

"What about it?"

"Brand-new. They looked like a couple of city fellows on a uranium hunt."

"Might be." Smythe turned toward the cabin door. "Let's go inside and see if this place can be used."

The interior of the cabin was crudely furnished with the barest of essentials. There was a built-in bunk, a table, and a chair. Also a couple of shelves above the homemade sink, on which a cracked washbasin stood. In the stove, a newly lighted fire burned brightly.

Hoolihan had not removed his blankets or the small stock of provisions and cooking utensils. Suddenly Brady strode to the table which stood in the center of the room. The top of the table was littered with chunks of rock and dirt.

A look of greed came into Smythe's face. "It may be ore!" he exclaimed. "Let me see it." He grabbed a few of the chunks and carried them to the doorway. His eyes lighted at the sight of thin traces of yellow running through the rock. "Brady! Look here! This is gold ore!" The lawyer's finger trembled as he pointed to the thin vein of golden color.

Brady laughed as he took the rocks from Smythe and tossed them out on the ground. "Fool's gold," he said. "You're not the first one to make that mistake. Many a prospector has lost his head, thinking he's struck it

rich, only to find that he's got nothing but worthless pyrites."

"Are you sure that isn't gold?"

Brady nodded. "I'm sure. As a matter of fact, real gold ore doesn't look like anything at all. I've known men who lugged hundreds of pounds of this stuff across mountains and deserts, thinking they were rich."

"What do you make of this?"

"This stuff is wet," said Brady. "The two who just left here must have brought it in."

Smythe chuckled. "Probably thought they had struck gold. Maybe that's why they were so anxious to locate Hoolihan."

"Could be," said Brady.

"But if that's the case, why didn't they take those samples with them?"

"Probably didn't want to call our attention to 'em. Maybe they figured we wouldn't look inside the cabin, or if we did look in, we wouldn't think anything about the stuff."

"That's obviously it," Smythe said. "I think I'll change my plans, Brady. I'm going back to Pine today."

"Not staying here overnight?"

Smythe shook his head. "I'm going to try to find out more about those two."

Before Smythe could leave the lumber camp, he had to go over certain details with Brady. He squirmed impatiently while the conference was in progress and hurried it through as quickly as possible. The afternoon

was well advanced when the lawyer left the camp, and darkness had fallen by the time he reached Pine. He returned the rented horse to the livery stable. Then, instead of going to his home or office, he went directly to the only restaurant in town, the one operated by Mrs. Basset.

"Evenin', Counselor," greeted the proprietress. "Want to sit at the counter or a table?"

"Neither one right now," replied Smythe. "I'm looking for someone." His eyes moved along the long side wall as he added, "A man of about thirty and a young fellow in his teens. I see them," he said suddenly.

"Sittin' near the back with Hoolihan," replied Mrs. Basset.

"When did Hoolihan return to town?"

"This afternoon. He came in for coffee, and told me how he'd been let down by a man he'd counted on as a lifelong friend."

"Has he been here ever since?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Smythe. He had his coffee and left. I think he went to see about gettin' a room in the boardin' house. Then he spent some time in the sheriff's office across the street."

"When did he meet the two with whom he is sitting?"

"About an hour ago. They came in and ordered a meal. Hoolihan came in a few minutes later. They seemed to know each other real well. They shook hands, then they all sat down together."

Smythe looked toward the table again. He saw the man he knew as Walton draw a few pieces of rock out of his pocket and show them to Hoolihan.

Hoolihan studied the bits of rock very carefully. Then both he and the others at the table bent low and engaged in a whispered conversation that lasted for several minutes. Presently Hoolihan looked up and saw the lawyer. He rose from the table and advanced to where Smythe stood near the front of the restaurant.

"Smythe," said Hoolihan, "I want to talk to you."

"Well, Hoolihan," replied the lawyer, "I'm here. Start talking."

"Sure an' I'm ashamed of the way I acted the other day in the sheriff's office."

"You were angry," said Smythe. "Maybe you weren't yourself."

"Is it too late for me to make me apologies?"

With an oily smile, the lawyer said, "Don't worry about it. I knew you were steamed up at the time."

"You're not holdin' them things I said ag'in me?"

"A lawyer makes a lot of temporary enemies, Hoolihan. If I held a grudge against everyone who called me names, I wouldn't be speaking to anyone. The past is dead. Bygones are bygones."

"Will you sit down with me for a minute?"

"Of course."

The two sat down at a front table.

"Look here, Smythe," Hoolihan said. "I know I ain't in a position to ask favors of you—"

"I told you the past was dead, Hoolihan. What can I do for you?"

Hoolihan held out a small piece of rock. "Look at this," he said.

Smythe took the chunk and turned it this way and that, studying all sides carefully. "What about it?"

"See that yellow stuff in there?"

"Yes. It's iron pyrites. That's the technical term. It's generally called fool's gold."

"Sh-h-h-h!" cautioned Hoolihan. "Not so loud. I don't want those two in back to hear what we say."

"Who are they?"

"Just acquaintances. They're from the big city," Hoolihan chuckled. "They think this stuff is gold ore."

"They do, eh."

"Look," said Hoolihan, with an edge of tension in his voice. "They think I still own the land on Dipper Creek. They want to buy it from me."

"Is that where this stuff came from?" asked the lawyer, pointing to the pieces of rock on the table.

Hoolihan nodded.

"Your acquaintances don't know you've sold that land to me?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell them?"

"Listen, Smythe—"

"I'm listening."

"You put a pretty raw deal over on me, but I'll overlook that if you give me the chance to get a little some-

thin' out o' the land. I can sell some of that Dipper Creek property to those two."

"You'd be misrepresenting if you told them there was gold in the land," Smythe said guardedly.

"Sure, Smythe, an' I've told them nothin'!"

"You'd be swindling them."

Hoolihan frowned darkly at the attorney. "You needn't talk so high an' mighty with me," he said. "You well know that there'd be nothin' in the deal that'd be jail trouble. If men want to buy a piece o' land an' want it bad enough to pay a fancy price for it, that's their business. I didn't tell those two that stuff they had was gold ore. I said it might be gold, an' it might not be gold. In fact, when they suggested goin' partners with me, I told 'em I wasn't interested. I told them I didn't think the stuff was worth a thing. Then they said maybe I'd sell a little strip o' the land to them."

"What'd you say?"

"I said I'd think it over."

"You didn't say you no longer own the land?"

"I said I'd think it over, an' that's all."

"Have those two got any cash?" asked the lawyer.

"They're carryin' five hundred dollars in cash between them. They may have more. I don't know about that."

Smythe became cunning. "You've given me some interesting information," he said. "Why should I permit you to sell the land? I control it. I could sell direct to those men, couldn't I?" Smythe watched Hoolihan

carefully, wondering how much law the Irishman knew. Did Hoolihan know that if he chose to do so, he could block the deal until the balance had been paid on the timberland and the deed and title transferred to Smythe? Of this, Hoolihan seemed ignorant.

"You wouldn't do that, would you, Smythe?"

"Why not?"

"Ah, now look here, you already put a fast deal over on me. Five hundred dollars don't mean nothin' to a man in your position. You're goin' to make a fortune on the timber you're takin' off the land. Why don't you give me the chance to make a deal with those gents an' get a little piece o' money?"

"I'll have a talk with them," Smythe said noncommittally. "If they really want to buy some land, I might let you in on the deal."

Hoolihan, carefully coached in the part he had to play, acted as if he had been mercilessly cheated, as indeed he would have been. He spoke in a whining voice. "That's not fair, Smythe. This whole deal should, by all that's right, belong to me!"

"You have a lot to learn about business, Hoolihan."

"Ah, that I have," sighed the little man woefully.

"Wait right here. I'll talk to those acquaintances of yours, and if I can close a deal, I'll see that you get your share."

Smythe rose from the table and walked to the back of the restaurant.

CHAPTER 20

A Strip of Land

WHIZ WALTON and Tom Quest found the food in Mrs. Basset's restaurant exceptionally well prepared. They were hungry and ate heartily, but as they ate, they kept an eye on Smythe and Hoolihan at the table in front.

"I hope," murmured Tom, "Hoolihan carries off his part without making a slip-up."

"He should be able to," replied the columnist. "We spent enough time drilling him."

"Smythe's getting up now," Tom said.

"If things are going according to plan, he should be coming our way."

"He is," replied Tom.

Jonathan Smythe wore his most ingratiating smile as he approached the table. "We meet again," he said cordially.

"How do you do, Mr. Smythe," said Tom.

"Are we trespassing again?" asked Whiz. "Or is it all right for us to eat here?"

"I deserve that," smiled the lawyer. "I was annoyed at a number of things when we met at Dipper Creek, and treated you discourteously. I'm sorry for that."

"That's all right," Tom said. "We came here and luckily ran into Mr. Hoolihan."

"I saw you talking to him. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Help yourself to the chair," replied Whiz Walton. "Hope you don't mind if we go on with our dinner."

"Not at all. Go right ahead. I do want to explain something. You were asking about Hoolihan. I didn't have the chance to tell you he no longer owns that property on Dipper Creek."

"He doesn't?" asked Tom, feigning surprise. "Who does own it?"

"Didn't Hoolihan tell you he had sold the property to me?"

Whiz Walton frowned and said, "Tom, I think Hoolihan was trying to put something over on us."

"It sure looks that way," agreed Tom.

"Put something over on you? What do you mean?"

"We told Hoolihan we might be interested in buying a little strip of land from him," explained Whiz. "He didn't tell us that it wasn't his to sell."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said that a deal might be worked out."

Smythe chuckled. "Do you know what the little skinflint was trying to do when he talked to me a moment ago?"

"What?"

"He was trying to buy back some of the land he'd sold to me."

"Buy it back from you, then sell it to us at a higher price," said Whiz.

Tom looked shocked. "I didn't think he'd do such a thing to us."

"Do you two know him very well?"

"No, but we had him sized up as an honest man."

"Why do you want to buy that land?"

"Personal reasons."

"There is plenty of other land available around here. Are you interested in timberland?"

"Not as a buy," said Whiz. "We just want that little strip of land that's been already cleared of timber. The strip along the creek."

"With the cabin on it," added Tom.

"Well, I see no reason why I shouldn't make you a fair price—the same price I'd make to Hoolihan."

"What is your price?"

"Two thousand dollars," said Smythe in a manner that implied he would accept less.

"You're away out of line," said Whiz.

"If you want a good strip of creekside land—"

"We don't want it that badly."

"Remember, there's a building on it. A place you can live in."

"That shack's worth a couple of hundred dollars as firewood," the columnist stated flatly.

"As far as we're concerned," added Tom, "you may keep the building. Move it off the land."

"What do you consider a fair price?"

"It's your land," said Whiz. "What's it worth to you?"

"I said—"

"Come away down."

"I might consider eighteen hundred dollars."

Tom looked worried. "Gosh," he said, "we can't pay anything like that."

"Stop thinking in four figures, Smythe," Whiz jeered. "We know what land is worth. In this country it brings about ten bucks an acre when there's no timber on it."

"Just how much of the land are you thinking about?" asked the attorney.

"The strip that's been cleared of timber along the edge of the creek. I'd say it's about a hundred feet deep. For that we'll pay about three hundred dollars."

There was more bartering and discussion of prices and values. In the end an agreement was reached at five hundred dollars. This was several times what the denuded land was worth and Smythe was well pleased with himself. "Give me the cash," he said, "and I'll draw up a bill of sale."

"Not so fast," said Whiz. "We'll pay you when we see the bill of sale and the deed to the property."

"The deed?"

"Yes. You know what a deed is, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course."

"You say the land is yours to sell, but we have no proof of it. That's why we want to see the deed."

"I'll have it for you in the morning," promised Smythe. "Also a bill of sale."

"That's when you'll get your money. Meanwhile, we'll pay you fifty dollars as a deposit."

"That'll do," replied Smythe, somewhat taken back by the mention of a deed. He scribbled a receipt on the back of one of his business cards and handed it to Whiz in exchange for fifty dollars in cash. Then he rose, shook hands with Tom and the reporter, who promised to meet him in his office the following morning.

On his way out of the restaurant, the lawyer again spoke to Hoolihan. "We'll go to my office," he said. "We have some business to discuss."

CHAPTER 21

Time Bomb

JONATHAN SMYTHE was on hand when the land office opened in the morning. He completed his business, then hurried to his office, sat down at his desk, and took a number of documents out of his pocket.

He spread out one of the papers and studied it carefully to make sure it was exactly as it should be. It was a document that had been signed by Halfpint Hoolihan after a lengthy discussion on the previous evening. Smythe had paid the Irishman fifty dollars in cash for the signature.

Though Smythe would not secure title to most of the land on the mountainside until the balance owed had been paid to Hoolihan, he now owned the narrow strip bordering on the creek at the foot of the mountain. That much had been transferred and was now his to sell to Tom and Whiz Walton.

Smythe finished reading the paper just before the door opened to admit the buyers.

The lawyer greeted his visitors with a smile and invited them to sit down. "I'm ready for you," he said. "Did you bring the cash?"

Whiz nodded.

"First of all," Smythe said, "you'll want to be sure I am the owner of the property I'm about to transfer."

"That's right."

"Here are the papers. There's the deed," touching one paper, "and here is the search and survey."

Tom and Whiz picked up the documents and read them carefully to make sure they were in order. The land to be transferred was carefully described and bounded. Hoolihan's signature was authentic and so were the signatures of the witnesses. They nodded and returned the blue-bound documents.

"I have had the bill of sale prepared," said Smythe, as he drew another typed paper from his desk. "It's ready for signing whenever you're ready to hand over the money."

"We should have some witnesses, shouldn't we?" asked Whiz.

"All taken care of. I asked Sheriff Lawson and his deputy to drop in this morning. They'll be here any minute."

"They're the ones who witnessed Hoolihan's signature?" Tom asked.

Smythe nodded.

"You," said Whiz pointedly, "are a pretty slick operator, aren't you, Smythe?"

"What do you mean?"

"When we talked to you last night, you didn't even own the title to this land."

"Who said so?"

"Look at the date of your agreement with Hoolihan. You got the land from him after we talked terms, didn't you?"

Smythe smiled in a worldly wise way. "To be perfectly frank," he said, "I didn't have a title to the land when we made our deal. But I'd made a partial payment, so Hoolihan couldn't have sold that land to you."

"It doesn't matter," Tom said. "We have it now. That's the main thing."

Lawson and the deputy came through the door. "What's this paper you want us to witness?" asked the sheriff.

"Just a land transfer, that's all," explained the lawyer.

The papers were signed and witnessed; the money handed over to Smythe, who counted it carefully. He handed a dollar bill to the sheriff and to the deputy for their services as witnesses, then rose to his feet. "I guess that concludes negotiations," he said. "Thanks for everything."

"Thank you," said Whiz, putting the documents into his pocket. "You don't know how glad we are to get that land."

"I hope it comes up to your expectations," smiled Smythe.

"I'm sure it will," said Tom. He and Whiz left with the two lawmen.

Alone in his office, Smythe riffled the bills and chuckled. "They think they've put one over on me," he said to himself. "They think they've bought a gold claim! I'd like to see their faces when they find out that the yellow stuff is worthless."

The shifty attorney would have had certain misgivings if he could have known the real purpose behind the purchase of that strip of land.

While he sat congratulating himself on an easy profit, Tom, Whiz Walton, and the two lawmen entered the sheriff's office where Hoolihan sat waiting with a wide grin.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"Perfectly," said Tom enthusiastically. "Smythe did everything exactly as we figured."

Whiz Walton waved the papers. "Here's the works," he said. "The neatest little package of high explosive any man has ever had his hands on! Smythe doesn't know it yet, but he's just lighted the fuse on a time bomb that's going to blow up in his face!"

CHAPTER 22

Hoolihan's Big Moment

FOR FIVE DAYS after selling the creekside land, Jonathan Smythe went about his routine affairs in Pine without the slightest suspicion that the activities of a number of people were directed toward his undoing. He saw no more of the man named Walton, Walton's young friend Tom, or Hoolihan.

Smythe's first inkling that trouble lay ahead came on the evening of the fifth day after the sale. It was in the form of an urgent message from Brady. The manager of the Dipper Creek lumber camp asked Smythe to visit the camp at the earliest possible moment.

The attorney left Pine early the following morning on a rented horse. During the ride he felt vaguely uneasy. His uneasiness increased as he neared the camp.

He sensed that something was wrong. There seemed to be something in the very air; something of ominous significance. He listened attentively, but heard nothing except the clump of his horse's hoofs and the rippling of Dipper Creek.

And then he realized that it was the silence itself that was significant. The familiar sounds of saws, axes, the chugging of the donkey engine, and the occasional shouts of men and the screech of logs sliding down the flume, were missing. All work must have stopped on the timber-covered mountainside.

"Might be a strike," he told himself. "If that's the case, I'll tell those laborers where they stand!"

He was riding along the west bank of the creek toward the cabin he had sold to the man named Walton. He saw smoke coming from the cabin chimney and then, some distance beyond the cabin, noticed that the flume was gone!

This wooden trough, down which the trimmed logs had been slid from the cutting region to the creek, no longer extended across the strip of land Smythe had sold. Instead, it had been cut off some distance uphill at the boundary line of Walton's recently purchased property.

Hoolihan appeared in the cabin door and waved. "Hi, there, Smythe! Rein in."

The lawyer halted his horse a few yards from the door.

"Sure," said the Irishman, "an' you may as well dis-

mount an' step inside. The other gents are in there waitin' for you."

"Who?"

"You'll be seein' when you come into me cabin."

"It's no longer your cabin," replied Smythe, dismounting. "You sold it to me along with the land."

"An' you sold it to Whiz Walton. That was the beginnin'."

Smythe wondered what lay behind Hoolihan's grin of confidence. "Step right in," Hoolihan continued. "Brady is inside."

"Brady? The manager of my lumber crew? What's he doing in that cabin?"

"Right now, he's gettin' his breath after a long period o' cussin'," Hoolihan chuckled.

Brady appeared at the open door. His red face was beaded with sweat and distorted with rage. "Come in here, Smythe!" he blustered. "Come in an' see what you've done to us!"

The one room of the cabin was almost filled to capacity. In addition to Brady and Hoolihan, Smythe saw Whiz Walton and Tom Quest. Also Sheriff Lawson, Gulliver, and a well-dressed man with white hair and a dignified bearing.

"Hello, Smythe," Whiz Walton said, stepping forward with the white-haired man at his side. "I think you've heard of this gentleman. His name is Gordon Cartright."

"Cartright!" gasped Smythe. "The—the attorney?"

"Right," grinned the columnist. "One of the most brilliant attorneys in the country."

"You flatter me, Mr. Walton," the white-haired man smiled. "Your name is Smythe?" he continued, looking at the lawyer from Pine.

"Y-yes, sir. I—I'm very pleased to meet you."

Smythe was obviously awed by unexpectedly meeting face to face the man whose legal work had made him almost legendary. "Wh-what are you doing here, sir?" Smythe asked.

"My friend, Mr. Walton, telephoned me and asked me to attend this conference."

"You see," explained Whiz, "I work for a newspaper. Mr. Cartright has done a lot of work for the same newspaper. His San Francisco office has handled all of our biggest lawsuits on the west coast."

"B-but," faltered Smythe, "why did you have him come *here*?"

Gulliver broke in. "I'll tell yo' why, yo' schemin' crook! It's because yo' maybe wouldn't believe it if one o' the rest of us told yo' where yo' stand legally."

"You've got no standing, Smythe!" exploded Brady. "You sold us out!"

"Wha-what are you talking about?"

"You sold this land to Walton! Right?"

Smythe couldn't deny it.

"Then," Brady continued, "Walton sold it to Hoolihan."

"That he did," the happy Irishman said. "I got back

what's me rightful own! An' here's the bill o' sale to prove it!"

Smythe had to fight to maintain any semblance of composure. He was now fully aware of the trap into which his greed had taken him. "Y-you," he said to Hoolihan, "you sold the land to me—"

"An' bought it back from me friend, Whiz Walton," replied Hoolihan. "Now it's mine, lock, stock, an' barrel—free an' clear, to have an' to hold." He turned to Cartright. "Ain't that right?"

The white-haired gentleman nodded. "I have made the title search," he said. "There is no doubt about who owns this land."

"But what about the rest of the land?" asked Smythe. "I sold only the strip that has been cleared of timber. The strip extending from the bank of the creek about a hundred feet west."

"That's right," agreed Cartright. "The sale of this land in no way alters the agreement you have made with Hoolihan to purchase the timberland on the mountainside."

Smythe spoke sharply to the manager of the lumber camp. "That being the case, Brady, why aren't your men at work?"

"Just wait," replied Brady, "until you hear the rest!"

"You go right ahead an' work," said Hoolihan. "Cut all the trees you doggone please, only don't bring 'em across me land!"

"We can't get them to the creek without crossing the

Irishman's strip of land!" snapped Brady. "He cut down the flume where it crossed his land!"

"Cut down the flume, I did!" Hoolihan drew himself up and spoke like the owner of a baronial estate. "It disturbed me no end," he said, "to hear them logs shootin' down the flume."

"So that's it," said Smythe. "You're going to make us pay for the privilege of building our flume across your land! All right, you half-pint troublemaker! I know when I'm backed against the wall. How much do you want?"

Hoolihan lifted his eyebrows and spoke with a dignity that made Tom Quest chuckle audibly. "You'll have to speak to me attorney."

"Your attorney!" fumed Smythe.

"Mister Cartright is representin' me interests."

"Now yo're talkin', Halfpint," cried Gulliver delightedly.

Gordon Cartright smiled.

"All right, I'll talk to your attorney!" Smythe turned to Cartright. "How much?"

"For what?"

"The right to build a flume across this strip of land."

"That right," replied the white-haired attorney slowly, "is not for sale."

"Not for sale?"

"I knew it!" cried Brady. "Now where do we stand?" he demanded of Smythe. "Now what'll you tell the big

boss? What'll he do when he hears that you got us into this mess because you wanted to make a few hundred bucks by sellin' this land?"

Smythe paled.

"You know," raved Brady, "what happens to men who fall down on the job!"

"I—I didn't expect anything like—like this," stammered Smythe. "I—I thought Walton and his friend wanted to look for gold on this land. I figured they'd move on in a short time—"

"We never intended to look for gold," laughed Whiz. "Tom and I figured you'd come here sooner or later, so we had that fool's gold on the table for you to see. After we talked to you, we went to Pine. Hoolihan had already gone there, and he'd been instructed in the part he was to play."

"If I do say so meself," put in Hoolihan modestly, "I played me part well."

"You were great!" enthused Tom.

Smythe was pale and visibly shaken. To Cartright, he said, "We've got to move that timber. What do you want from me?"

"Only what you promised to pay Hoolihan."

"What I promised—?" Smythe echoed.

"You and Hoolihan made a deal. You agreed to a certain price that you would pay for his property. I'll admit that the price was high. It was quite a bit more than the land was worth, but you fixed it yourself."

"I—I agreed to pay the balance in five months," the lawyer said.

"That's perfectly all right. My client will wait five months."

"Then we can go ahead and move the timber?" the lawyer asked eagerly.

Cartright shook his head. "Hardly. You can move the timber after you've paid Hoolihan the balance."

"An' not a minute before!" added Hoolihan.

"You've got to scrape up the balance of that cash and pay Hoolihan!" Brady said. "That's all there is to it. You've got to do it out of your own pocket, because the boss'll never pay it."

"It—it'll break me!" the lawyer choked.

"Then you'll have to go broke!"

The blood drained from Smythe's already pale face, and beads of perspiration appeared on his sloping forehead.

"If you don't make good this blunder," went on Brady, "you'll get the same as Daniels and Vinton!"

Smythe's knees buckled; he clutched the edge of the table, then collapsed to the floor.

Tom Quest dropped to his knees beside the fallen man and felt for a pulse. "I guess he just fainted," he said. "I'll get some water for him."

Gulliver turned to the manager of the lumber camp. "Brady, you mentioned the boss. We want to know who he is."

For a moment, Brady was silent. He seemed to be

debating with himself. Then his manner became frank and sincere. "I've had enough of this outfit," he said. "I didn't know what I was getting into when I signed up to manage the camp. I thought Smythe was the owner."

"Just a figurehead, isn't he?" asked Whiz Walton.

"He's a figurehead as far as owning this camp is concerned, the same as Daniels posed as the owner of the Snake River camp. But Smythe is a lot closer to the big boss than Daniels was."

"Who is the big boss?" the columnist asked.

"I don't know."

"You mean you don't want to tell!"

"I mean exactly what I said. I don't know who he is."

Gulliver stepped close to Brady. "If," he said menacingly, "yo're lyin'—" He left the sentence suspended on a threatening note.

"I'm not lying! I don't know who he is."

"What's he trying to do?" asked Whiz. "Is he trying to get control of the timber industry?"

Brady shrugged his shoulders. "Could be." He turned to Sheriff Lawson. "I've got to unload and clear the air, Sheriff. I haven't liked this deal from the start. I thought it was a rotten trick Smythe tried to pull on Hoolihan. That was bad enough, but when it comes to murder—well, that's more than I can take. I don't know the name of the man who gave the order to murder Vinton and Daniels, but I can tell you who carried out the order!"

"Who?" demanded the sheriff.

Brady pointed to Smythe.

"Smythe killed the two men in the jail?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Poison. He went into the restaurant and waited for the chance to drop the poison into the coffee."

"How do you know?"

"The poison was sent through the mail. It came to the lumber camp. Smythe picked it up there. There was more poison than he needed for two men, so you'll probably find what's left somewhere in his home or office."

"Where," broke in Gordon Cartright, "did the poison come from?"

"It was mailed from a small town in the southern part of the state, but there was no return address on the package."

"He's regaining consciousness," said Tom Quest, who had been applying wet cloths to the face of the unconscious lawyer.

"He's your poisoner," stated Brady. "But when you lock him up, you'll have to be on the lookout for another murderer."

"Another?"

Brady nodded.

"Who?" demanded Sheriff Lawson.

"I don't know. But I'll bet you all the tea in China, that the boss will send *someone* to get Smythe!"

"B-break me—" It was Smythe speaking in a thin voice as he regained consciousness. "I'll go broke trying to pay for the land."

"Open your eyes, Smythe," said the sheriff. "You have more than money to worry about now."

Smythe's eyes opened. "I—I guess I fainted—"

"You did. And now you're under arrest!"

"Arrest? For what?"

"For the murder of Daniels and Vinton."

The color flooded Smythe's cheeks. He stood up and looked at Brady. "You—" he began. "Y-you told them!"

"You bet I did, Smythe! From now on, I'm looking out for Number One! Meaning *me*."

CHAPTER 23

Smythe Beats the Law

It was late afternoon when Sheriff Lawson rode into Pine with Jonathan Smythe a prisoner in handcuffs. The two men on horseback were followed by Gulliver's jeep which carried Tom, Whiz, and Gordon Cartright, who somehow managed to maintain his dignity even in the battered little car.

During the ride from Dipper Creek, Smythe seemed to be in a state of shock. He said nothing and his eyes had a glazed look. But as he dismounted in front of the jail, he broke down, sobbing and pleading. He was a picture of abject terror.

"If you jail me," he wailed, "I'll be killed! They'll murder me!"

"We'll keep you alive somehow," replied the sheriff,

gripping Smythe's arm, "until the law sends you to the gas chamber."

"No, no!" Smythe dropped to the ground.

"Get up!" ordered the sheriff.

"What's goin' on?" asked the deputy, rushing out of the office.

The sheriff told him in a few words. "Take his other arm," he finished. "We'll have to drag him to the cell."

Sobbing and wailing, the lawyer was taken through the sheriff's office to the door of the cell. There he shouted, "This isn't legal! It isn't right! You can't execute me without a trial! I'm entitled to a fair trial!"

"You'll get a fair trial," snapped Sheriff Lawson.

"I won't!" Smythe shrilled. "I won't get it! I'll be poisoned! I'll be killed! The boss will send someone to kill me just as he ordered me to poison Daniels and Vinton!"

Sheriff Lawson grabbed a handful of Smythe's shirt and jerked the broken man erect. "Listen," he barked. "Maybe I should've told you, Smythe. Being under arrest for murder, anything you say can be used against you. You know that!"

"I don't care!" wailed Smythe. "Don't lock me up, Sheriff! They'll kill me!"

"Who'll kill you?"

"The boss!"

"Smythe, listen!"

But Smythe was past listening to reason. He broke into a fit of hysterical sobbing. Lawson gave him an

open-handed slap on the left side of his face. The terrified man's sobs subsided; he shuddered as if gripped by a terrible chill.

"Listen," the sheriff persisted. "You just said you poisoned those two who were in jail. Do you realize you said that, Smythe?"

"It doesn't matter," the lawyer said dully. "If you lock me up, the boss will kill me before I can get into a trial court."

"Who is the boss?"

"I c-can't tell you. I c-can't tell anything."

"If you're so all-fired sure he'll get you, don't you think your best chance is to give us his name so's we can deal with him?"

"You can't deal with him and neither can anyone else. He's too big. Too powerful. He has his agents everywhere. He has spies all over. He knows everything that goes on."

Sheriff Lawson sighed, unlocked the cell door, then locked it after he and the deputy had dragged Smythe inside.

The lawyer lay on the cot, his face buried in the blanket, his body shaking with sobs.

"Keep a close watch on him," Lawson told his deputy. "We'll leave him alone until he gets control of himself. Then we'll go through the formalities of booking him. Meanwhile, I'll get the judge to sign an order, so's I can search his house and office."

During the next half hour Smythe's sobs diminished.

For another half hour he lay quiet and thoughtful. He seemed fully composed when he finally rose, stepped to the barred door, and asked the deputy if he might see the sheriff.

Sheriff Lawson came at once. "Glad to see you've got yourself under control," he said.

The lawyer nodded. "Sorry I broke down," he said.

"Is that all you wanted to say to me?"

"No. I want to know where I stand." Smythe was now extremely calm.

"You're charged with the murder by poison of Daniels and Vinton."

"I know the charge. How much of a case is there against me?"

"It's a tight case, Smythe. I cleaned out your desk."

"I—I thought you'd do that."

"Standard procedure," replied the lawman. "You know what I found there."

"Poison."

"The same kind that killed Daniels and Vinton. Also your account books and some unsigned letters of instruction. I reckon they came from—the boss."

"Yes, they did."

"Did he send you the money you deposited in the Pine Bank from time to time?"

"Yes. The boss sent that to me for expenses."

"We can make a mighty good case against you. And on top of everything else, you admitted poisoning Daniels and Vinton."

"Did I?"

The sheriff nodded. "You admitted it while you were hysterical. I tried to tell you everything you said would be held against you."

"Then I've little chance to escape the death penalty."

"You'll have a chance to plead your case before a jury," the sheriff promised. "Maybe, if you turn state's evidence and tell who gave you your orders, you'll get off with twenty years or life, instead of the death penalty."

"I want to do some writing, Sheriff."

"Writing?"

"I—uh—I want to prepare my defense."

"Oh," muttered the sheriff in a disappointed voice. "I hoped you'd write out a lot of information about this lumber syndicate."

"Maybe I will."

"I'll send some paper and pencils in to you."

"Sheriff, I'd like my fountain pen. The one that was in the center drawer of my desk. The thick one. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind. It's in my office with the other things we brought when we cleaned out your desk. I'll get it for you."

A few minutes later, Sheriff Lawson passed a pad of ruled paper and the bulky fountain pen through the bars of the cell door. A curious, faraway look came into Smythe's eyes as he gripped the pen.

"Now, Sheriff," he said, "I'll show you a trick that may surprise you."

"Eh?" said the unsuspecting lawman. He watched Smythe unscrew the cap of the pen. Then he realized that he had been duped. Smythe stuck the pen into his mouth and lifted the little gold lever that depressed the rubber sac.

Lawson yelled, "Hold on!" He unlocked the cell door and jerked it open.

The pen dropped to the floor as he grabbed the lawyer. "You crazy fool!" Lawson shouted. "What'd you do? What was in that pen?"

The lawyer smiled without mirth. "Sheriff," he said slowly, "the poison is painless." His eyelids fluttered and his legs went limp. He dropped to the floor—dead by his own hand.

CHAPTER 24

The Long Distance Call

GULLIVER TOOK his jeep to be serviced while Tom and Whiz Walton accompanied Gordon Cartright to the train. After the attorney had left Pine, they went to Mrs. Basset's restaurant and ordered dinner. They were in the middle of the meal when Gulliver rushed in with the news of Smythe's death.

"He died without naming the boss?" asked Whiz.

"Yep. The ornery polecat was a skunk to the last."

"Golly!" said Tom. "I was sure he'd name the boss!"

"So was I," the columnist said soberly. "In fact, I hoped to send out a special story to my paper tonight."

Gulliver sat down and gave his order to a waitress. Then he said, "At least we made some headway. We know for dead sure that there *is* a big boss. What's more,

we got Halfpint Hoolihan fixed up so's he won't lose all his timber without gittin' paid for it."

"I wouldn't count on that," Tom said.

"Why not, Tom?"

"We don't know what the boss's next move will be."

Gulliver frowned. "I wonder if that murderin' coyote will make another play to git Halfpint's pine."

"I wouldn't put it past him," said Whiz. "Maybe we ought to stay here in Pine for a while."

"Good idea," said Tom. "The boss will have to do something about running the lumber camp at Dipper Creek. Let's get rooms in the hotel and see what happens in the next few days."

"I'm for that," said Gulliver.

That made it unanimous. After dinner the three friends took rooms in the small hotel.

The following morning a number of well-dressed strangers arrived in Pine by train. They moved quickly through a series of legal maneuvers that took them to the courthouse, the bank, the land office, and the office that had been Jonathan Smythe's. They called on the judge, the coroner, and the sheriff. Armed with credentials, they claimed Smythe's books and records, and made arrangements for the dead man's burial.

Whiz Walton tried to talk to the strangers but found them aloof and non-committal. It was not until after they had left on the evening train that their accomplishments became known.

During the single day in Pine, they had closed the

book on Smythe's business affairs, and had, by some legal sleight-of-hand, transferred the dead man's interest in Hoolihan's timberland to a dummy company known as the "Dipper Creek Lumber Company." And they had opened a bank account for the company.

Hoolihan came into Pine that evening and told Tom Quest and his friends that one of the strangers had called on him and paid the full amount of the purchase price in cash. "An' what's more," the Irishman added, "he bought back that strip o' land along the creek, includin' me cabin. So now it's a man without a home that I am."

"With the cash you've got," observed Whiz Walton, "you can buy yourself a mansion."

"I'm buyin' meself more timberland," replied the little man. He went on, "The gent who called on me also called on Brady. Brady told me about it later. He's goin' to work for the new company an' go right on as he's been doin'."

"Somewhere, in the background of all these maneuvers," Whiz Walton murmured, "there's a man of tremendous power who's pulling the strings."

"I'd like to know who he is," Tom said.

"Think I wouldn't?" Whiz looked wistful. "It'd be the biggest news beat of the year to expose him."

"We came here," said Gulliver, "to git the Hoolihan out o' trouble. We done that, so now we ought to git back to my ranch in Texas."

"You and Tom go on without me."

"We don't want to go without you, Whiz," said Tom.

"I can't go with you now, Tom. I'm on the track of a story and I've got to run it down."

"Let's stay with him, Gulliver."

The big man looked dubious.

"Whiz helped you get Hoolihan out of trouble."

That clinched it. "All right," Gulliver agreed, "we'll stay around for a couple o' days."

During the next few days, Whiz Walton and Tom Quest did most of the legwork. In the hope that a clue to the identity of the boss might be found somewhere in the records, they went through many courthouse files of deeds, land transfers and tax reports. They talked to everyone who had had any dealings with the visitors, but they got nowhere.

After the fourth day, Gulliver and Tom sat in Whiz Walton's hotel room.

"It looks," said Gulliver, "as if Whiz Walton's hope for a big story has come ungummed. Now let's git started for my ranch."

The columnist sighed deeply. "I hate to give up."

The telephone rang and Whiz picked it up. "Walton speaking."

Ketterson's hearty voice came over the wires. "Hello, Whiz."

"Ketterson!" Whiz held the receiver back from his ear and gestured for Tom and Gulliver to lean close enough to hear the San Francisco millionaire.

"How did you know where to find me?" Whiz asked.

"It wasn't easy," laughed the millionaire. "I had the long distance operators calling all the lumber camps. They finally got hold of a man at the Snake River camp and he said you'd gone to Pine. How're things going?"

Whiz ran over his experiences as briefly as possible. When he finished, he said, "I'm glad you called, because you may be able to help me."

"Glad to do anything I can, Whiz," replied the voice in the receiver. "What do you want?"

"I want the name of the man who's behind the timber syndicate."

"Are you still convinced that there's one big outfit in control?"

"More convinced than ever. It's not only an illegal monopoly, it's an outfit that's already gone as far as murder to keep out of the spotlight."

"You're wrong, Whiz. After you left my place, I thought I'd look into the situation you'd mentioned. I did a lot of checking up, and if there had been any monopoly such as you're looking for, I'd have heard."

"You mean to say—" Whiz began.

"You're off on a blind trail this time," Ketterson interrupted. "You're barking at the moon."

"In spite of all you say," replied Whiz, "I know there's at least *one* man behind a lot of criminal activities."

Ketterson's voice was cooler. "Maybe you know more about it than I do."

"Maybe I do."

"Well, I did all I could to check up on the rumor for you, Walton. I called to give you my report. You're free to take it or leave it."

"Thanks for calling."

"Let me know if you find anything definite."

The columnist promised to do so, then said goodbye.

"What do you make of that?" he asked his friends.

"Golly," said Tom, "it doesn't seem possible that Mr. Ketterson couldn't find out anything about the monopoly. Everyone around here seems to know of it."

"Somehow," said Whiz, "I had the feeling he was trying to call us off before we learned too much."

"Do you think he's involved?" Tom asked.

"Could be."

For some time the three friends discussed the strange phone call. They were about to break up and go to their respective rooms for the night when someone rapped on the door.

"I'll see who it is." Tom opened the door and saw a hard-faced stranger who held a gun.

"Keep quiet!" the stranger said. "Back up!"

As Tom stepped backward, the gunman entered the room and covered Gulliver and Whiz Walton. "The first one who makes a noise or a sudden move," he said, "gets killed."

CHAPTER 25

Gulliver Plans a Move

GULLIVER'S INDIFFERENCE to peril would never cease to be a source of wonderment to Tom Quest and Whiz Walton. The big man sat grinning as if highly amused at the sight of the stranger who held the gun.

"Now," he said, "things are gittin' interestin'. Speak yo' piece, stranger. Why'd yo' come here wavin' that hardware?"

"You three are going to take a ride. If you do exactly as you're told, maybe you won't get hurt."

"Did the boss send yo'?"

"I'm not answering questions. Stand up and walk out of this room, then down the back stairs ahead of me."

"Whoever sent yo'," Gulliver continued, "made a

mighty big mistake. He should o' sent at least five or six hombres with guns instead o' just one."

"I can take care of the situation."

"I ain't seen yo' around town. Yo' must've come here mighty recent."

"Stand up and start walking!"

Tom Quest and Whiz Walton were on their feet, but Gulliver remained in his chair wholly relaxed. "What if I don't stand up?" the big man said. "Would yo' shoot an' bring half the town rushin' in here to see what's goin' on?"

"I've got orders!"

"Readin' the crime stories gives people the idea that a man with a gun can always git folks to do just what he says. Now that's all wrong. I figure you wouldn't dare squeeze that there gun trigger in this room. In the first place, the minute yo' shoot at me, my two friends will be on yo' like a swarm o' hornets. In the second place, half the people in town would hear the shot an' come on the run."

The gunman shifted his weight uneasily, as if he didn't know how to cope with such a situation.

"If yo' got the nerve to shoot, just blaze away. Me, I don't think yo'll do it." Suddenly, in the space of a blink, Gulliver became a mass of energy moving with the speed of lightning. He was out of the chair, side-swiping at the extended gun. His big open hand slapped the side of the weapon, knocking it from the stranger's hand, and sending it flying across the room.

The next instant his other hand shot forward, fingers extended, to jab the surprised visitor in the pit of the stomach.

As the man doubled over in anguish, Gulliver slapped him on the back of the head and sent him sprawling to the floor.

"Now," the big man said, "let's hogtie this critter, then ask him a few questions."

Tom said, "I'll rip up a sheet to tie him."

"No use ruinin' a good bedsheet," replied Gulliver, eyeing the stranger, who lay on the floor moaning in pain, with his arms hugging his stomach. "Hop next door to my room an' git some rope out o' my medicine chest."

A few minutes later the sullen-faced stranger's hands and feet were tightly tied.

"Now," said Gulliver, "we aim to ask yo' some questions."

"I'm not talking," the man gasped.

"We'll see about that," Gulliver growled.

"While you and Whiz are trying to make him talk," said Tom, "I'll see if I can find out anything about him."

Gulliver nodded. "Go ahead."

Tom left the room and hurried down the single flight of stairs to the lobby on the first floor. He looked at the register and asked the clerk, "Have you had any new arrivals this evening?"

"Yes. A Mr. Jones checked in a couple of hours ago."

Tom saw the name on the register. "I see he came from San Francisco."

"That's right."

"Did he have any phone calls?"

"Just one."

"How long ago?"

The clerk looked at his watch. "Within the last half hour."

"Local call?"

"No. It was a long distance call. From San Francisco."

"Thanks."

Tom hurried back to Whiz Walton's room. He learned that the stranger had resisted all persuasion to make him talk.

"I know his type," said Whiz. "I've seen the New York cops questioning this kind of crook. They don't talk."

"Did yo' learn anything, Tom?" asked Gulliver.

"Yes. He came from San Francisco, checked into the hotel a couple of hours ago and had a long distance call from San Francisco less than half an hour ago!"

Gulliver frowned deeply. "What," he said to the man who sat tied hand and foot, "yo' got to say about that?"

"Nothing."

"Who phoned yo'?"

"You ought to know by this time that I'm not giving out any information."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

"Ketterson! Listen to this for a theory. *He's* the boss!"

Tom and Gulliver waited for the columnist to proceed.

"Who knows more about the lumber business? No one! He has money enough to finance big operations and he's just the type who'd like to hold a monopoly! He knows all kinds of men and knows just where to find the right man for every job!"

"That makes sense," said Tom.

"Furthermore," went on the newshound, "he's ruthless enough to kill anyone who stands in his way! It's plain as day! He called me tonight to try to get us to drop the investigation. When he failed, he called this gunslinger and gave him orders! It checks, doesn't it?"

"It sure does," agreed Gulliver.

Whiz turned to the prisoner. "What about that?" he demanded. "Am I right?"

"I'm not talking."

"I wonder," said Whiz, "how we can prove that Ketterson's the big boss."

"Whiz," said Gulliver, "we know one thing about the big boss. He's willin' an' anxious to kill everyone who's likely to identify him."

"So it seems."

"Knowin' that, I think we can set up a trap!"

The columnist displayed interest.

"He already knows yo' aim to keep huntin' for the big boss."

"Yes."

"He sent this critter," Gulliver gestured toward the captive, "to take us out—likely to kill us."

"Right."

"Now, if he has an easy chance to kill yo', he'll take advantage of it. Ain't that so?"

Whiz looked uneasy. "You're probably right."

"Then we'll use yo' as bait for a trap!"

"Not so fast!" cried Whiz. "If a killer goes after the bait, how in blazes can I write my story?"

Gulliver grinned. "Leave that to me! Tom, yo' git my gunbelt an' meet me at the jeep." Gulliver reached for a towel and tied a knot in it. "I'll join yo' as soon as I gag this critter."

"What about me?"

"Yo', Whiz, are goin' for a ride with me an' Tom! We'll gag the prisoner so's he can't make trouble for us before we git back!"

CHAPTER 26

Live Bait

IT WAS LATE at night and the Dipper Creek lumber camp was silent when Whiz Walton walked up the hill alongside the flume, but there was a light burning in the office. The columnist rapped on the door, then went inside.

"Great scott!" exclaimed Brady. "You scared me out of a year's growth! How'd you get here?"

"In Gulliver's jeep as far as the cabin near the creek. I walked uphill from there."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you about the big boss."

Brady shrugged his shoulders. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "I'm just working on a job. I'm paid to see that this camp is run right and that we get out the timber as fast as possible. As long as my pay comes

through regularly, I'm not interested in anything else."

Whiz lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "You've changed since the last time I saw you," he said.

"How's that?"

"When we had the showdown with Smythe, you said you didn't want any part of the crooked operations that had been going on here."

"Oh, that's all straightened out now. A new outfit owns this place. Hoolihan has his money and Smythe is dead. That whole deal's a closed book."

"Then you think the new outfit is on the level?"

"As far as I know, it is. Have you any reason to think it isn't?"

Whiz nodded and said, "Yes."

"How's that?"

"It's still a dummy company with the big boss pulling the strings."

Brady closed the records on which he'd been working and placed them in the lower drawer of his desk. He closed and locked the drawer before he spoke. "Have you got any proof of what you say?"

"I came here to get proof," Whiz replied.

"How?"

The columnist sat down in a chair facing the camp boss. "Brady," he said, "you spent quite a bit of time with one of the men who came to Pine to take care of things after Smythe died."

Brady nodded.

"What did he tell you?"

"He just told me to repair the flume and get the men back on the job. That's what I've been doing."

"Didn't he tell you to report to someone?"

"I'm to report to one of the men who were here."

"Where?"

"At the home office of the Dipper Creek Company in San Francisco."

"What's the name of the man?"

"King," replied Brady promptly. "Henry King. Why're you asking me all these questions, Walton?" he inquired. "What made you think I could help you?"

"In every case I've run across so far, one man was in direct contact with the big boss. Daniels knew his identity. So did Smythe."

"So you figured that I would've been told his name when Smythe passed out of the picture. Is that it?"

"I hoped that was the case, and I hoped you'd play on my side, Brady."

Brady smiled and said, "I'm sorry I can't help you."

The lumberman was disarmingly frank. Whiz studied him for a moment, then said, "Yes, Brady, I think you would." He sighed. "Looks like I've had this trip for nothing."

"Sorry."

"Guess I'll have to sweat the name of the big boss out of the gunman who tried to shoot me."

Brady looked surprised. "Did someone try to shoot you?"

Whiz nodded. "He didn't make the grade. He's a

prisoner now, in Pine." He chuckled. "Guess I must be getting under the boss's skin with my investigation."

"Yes," replied Brady. "If he sent a gunman to shoot you, you *must* be getting under his skin!"

"Say!" Whiz spoke as if he had had a sudden thought. "I hate to drive all the way back to Pine in the dark—especially *alone*. Would it be all right if I spend the night in Hoolihan's cabin?"

"Well, uh—" Brady hesitated.

"If someone's using it—"

"No, no one's using it. Go ahead, Walton. Spend the night there if you want to. I'll loan you some blankets. Come up here in the morning and have breakfast with me."

"Thanks, I'll do that."

A short time later, Whiz Walton walked down the hill with two blankets carried over his arm. And Brady picked up the phone and dialed the long distance operator.

"Long distance," said a girl's voice.

Brady gave a San Francisco number that was not listed in the telephone directory. After a brief wait, a man's voice said, "Hello."

"Brady speaking."

"Yes, Brady?"

"Whiz Walton is here in the camp. He said someone had tried to kill him."

"And failed."

"Yes. The gunman's been captured. Walton thinks

he can sweat your name out of him in the morning."

"Is Walton in your camp alone?"

"Yes. He's going to sleep in the Hoolihan cabin."

"The situation," said the voice in San Francisco, "requires your personal attention. Do you understand?"

"Boss, I— If you mean what I think you do—"

"You know what I mean."

"I've never done anything like that. I—"

"Call me back when the job is done."

There was a click as the San Francisco party broke the connection.

Brady rose from his desk. His face was grim and his lips compressed to a thin line. He stepped to a locker in the corner of the room, opened it, and took out a heavy-caliber gun. After making sure it was loaded, he stuck it beneath his belt, then turned out the light, left the office, and locked the door.

Brady moved with catlike stealth down the side of the mountain. He reached the bank of the stream about a hundred yards north of the cabin where Hoolihan had lived. He saw the cabin as a blob of black in the moonlight, and close to it, the stubby outline of Gulliver's jeep.

Seated on the ground, the manager of the camp removed his heavy boots and socks, then rolled the legs of his trousers up above his knees.

This was a precautionary measure he had thought of on his way downhill. He tucked his socks into a pocket, then tied his boots together and hung them around his

neck. It seemed like a smart idea to make the approach to the cabin in the water so no identifying footprints would be found on the beach.

The water was cold, but Brady didn't notice it. His mind was filled with the grim assignment. He dreaded the task ahead, but he knew the penalty for disobedience! It was the same as the penalty for failure. Death!

Brady walked cautiously along the steeply shelving edge of the stream. Step by step, he neared the cabin. Then he was abreast of it. Two steps between the cabin and the stream. He must remember to rub out the footprints he left there. Rub them out—afterward.

He left the water. Two steps. He was at the side of the cabin, breathing heavily. He wondered if the man inside the cabin could hear the thumping of his heart. He wondered if all men felt this way when about to commit cold-blooded murder for the first time. He drew the gun from his belt, cocked it, then moved to the open window.

Enough moonlight reached the inside of the cabin to reveal a humped figure beneath the blanket on the bunk. Brady lifted the gun. It wavered in his trembling grip. He rested the long barrel on the window sill, to steady it. He crouched and sighted carefully, then fired.

The crack of the heavy gun sounded like heavy artillery to Brady. And the voice he heard sounded like a roll of thunder.

"Drop that gun or I'll blow the legs out from under yo'!"

Brady cried out in panic. In desperation, he started to run.

"Don't shoot!" cried Tom Quest, leaping from behind the near-by brushwood. He raced after the fleeing man, then dived with arms outstretched. Never on the football field had Tom made a harder tackle. His shoulder struck the back of Brady's knees. His outflung arms closed around the gunman's thighs and Brady dropped, face forward, his gun flying from his hand.

"Got him!" cried Tom.

"Good goin', Tom!" bellowed Gulliver, running up with Whiz Walton and the sheriff close behind.

CHAPTER 27

Conclusion

It was ten minutes before applications of cold water to Brady's face restored the lumberman to consciousness. In the meantime, a number of men from the camp had hurried to the creek to investigate the gunshot.

"Brady," Whiz Walton said, "we can jail you for attempted murder. We've got an airtight case against you. But I'm more interested in Ketterson. You know that as long as he's out of jail, he'll be dangerous to you. He'll get you, the same as he got the others. He'll send someone to deal with you. You know that, don't you?"

Brady nodded. "I—I know," he said in a low voice. "My life isn't worth a dime."

"That's where you're wrong. We're going to see that Ketterson doesn't get you, but you've got to help us."

A look of interest came into Brady's face. "You mean to say that in addition to not pressing charges against me, you'll protect me from him?"

"Yes. I've checked up on you. You've been a straight-shooter all your life. You've held good jobs and your work's been first-rate. You made a mistake when you listened to Ketterson's representative. Isn't that true?"

Brady nodded. "I wish I'd never heard of Smythe —and later, Ketterson," he said bitterly. "I didn't want to kill you, Walton, but I knew I had no choice if I wanted to stay alive!"

"Are you willing to help us?" asked Sheriff Lawson.

Brady said, "Yes! Just tell me what to do!"

"Talk. I want to know everything you can tell about Ketterson."

"I can't tell you much."

"What you tell will be the entering wedge," Whiz Walton said. "That's all the law needs! Once we get a toehold on a case against Ketterson, things will open up."

"I'll tell you all I know."

"We'll take you to town with us," decided Gulliver. "We can all go in my jeep."

In the sheriff's office, Brady talked for over an hour while a stenographer took down every word. Then Tom and Whiz went to the hotel and returned to the office with the gunman, who had spent half the night

gagged and tied. When he learned that Brady had broken the ice, he did his best to earn leniency for himself when he went on trial.

In the end, the sheriff had enough information to justify the arrest of Ketterson in connection with the poisoning of Daniels and Vinton. And enough to justify his arrest on a number of other charges.

Whiz Walton had a sheaf of notes when he reached for the sheriff's phone and called the home of the managing editor of the San Francisco office of his newspaper.

"Wake up, Jim," he said when the editor's sleepy voice said, "Who's calling at this hour and it better be good!"

"Whiz Walton. Got a pencil handy?"

"I said it better be good, Walton. I meant it."

"Is cracking the lumber monopoly good?"

"You kidding?"

"No."

"Start talking."

"The name," said Whiz, "is Ketterson."

"*The* Ketterson?"

"Right."

"Wait'll I sit down. This ought to be good." There was a pause. "Let's have it."

The columnist talked steadily for half an hour. He finished by saying, "Sheriff Lawson of Pine is calling in representatives of the Federal Government. They'll take over on the monopoly charge while the state au-

thorities are making an airtight case on the murder rap."

"I've got it all, Whiz. Congratulations on a terrific story."

"Wait," said Gulliver. "Lemme talk to that gent."

Whiz Walton looked surprised. "Hold on, Jim," he said. "My friend, Gulliver, wants to speak to you."

Gulliver took the phone. "Yo', Jim, there's somethin' yo' got to do first thing yo' git out o' the house in the mornin'."

"What's that?"

"Go to Ketterson's place an' speak to the housekeeper. Her name is Emma Brandon, an' she's a dog-gone, downright fine woman who'll be needin' a good job. There's no cause for her to git mixed up in Ketterson's crooked dealin'."

"I know who she is, Gulliver. I'll see that she's taken care of."

"Yo' better," replied the big man. "Or me an' Tom won't help Whiz git any more big stories." He hung up the receiver.

"Good for you, Gulliver," grinned Tom Quest. "Now how about starting for Texas and your ranch?"

"That," grinned Gulliver, "is a first-rate idea. Let's git gittin'!"

TOM QUEST

Adventure Stories

By FRAN STRIKER

Tom Quest, hero of this exciting adventure series, finds action, suspense, and thrills to interest you for many readings.

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T-2. TELLTALE SCAR
T-3. CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP
T-4. SECRET OF THE LOST MESA
T-5. HIDDEN STONE MYSTERY
T-6. SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN
T-7. THE INCA LUCK PIECE
T-8. MYSTERY OF THE TIMBER GIANT

CLOVER BOOKS

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THE MYSTERY OF THE TIMBER GIANT

FRAN STRIKER

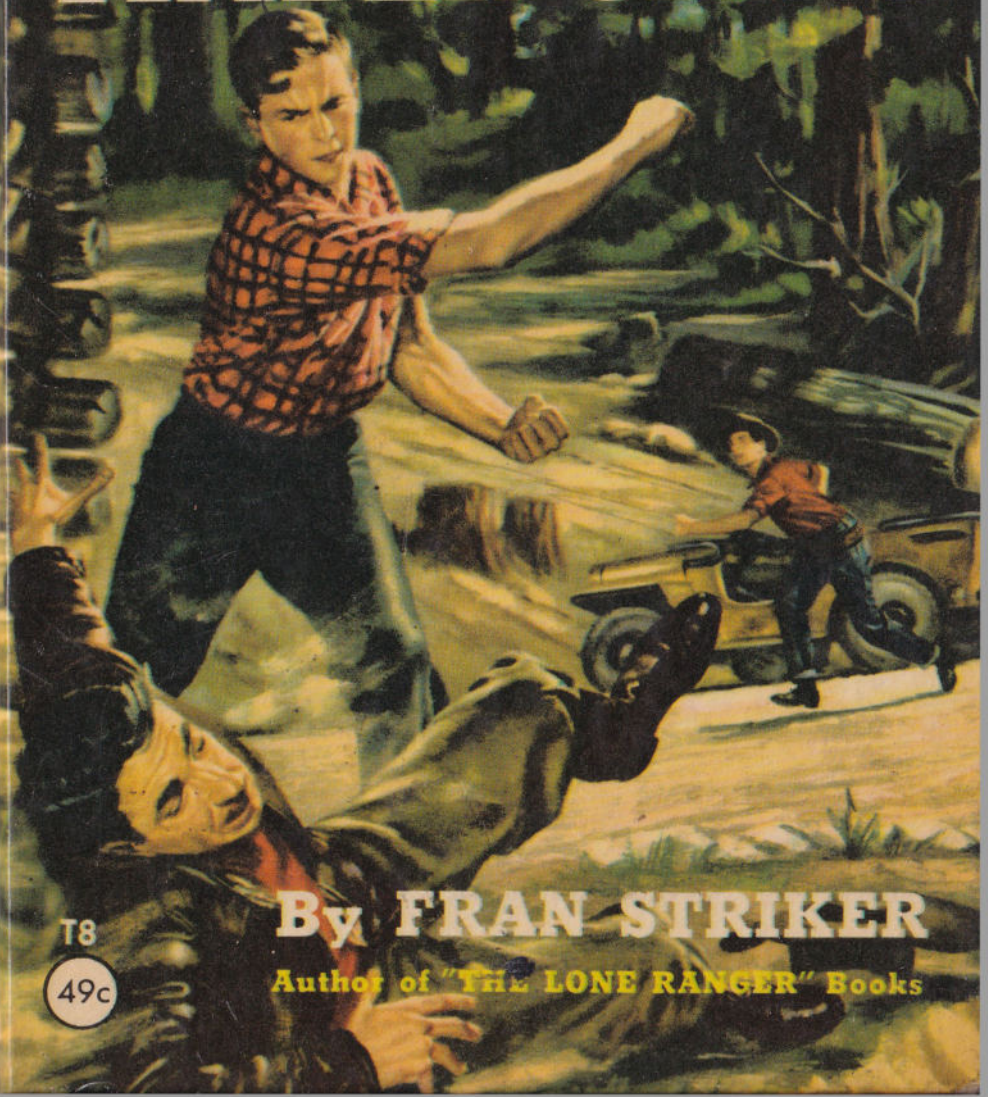
A TOM QUEST

ADVENTURE 8

CLOVER BOOKS

A Tom Quest Adventure

THE MYSTERY OF THE TIMBER GIANT



By FRAN STRIKER

Author of "THE LONE RANGER" Books

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